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BUFFALO BILL BAFFLED



OR,

The Deserter Desperado's Defiance.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S BLIND TRAIL,"
"BUFFALO BILL'S BUCKSKIN BROTHER-
HOOD," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRICE OF A LIFE.

A GROUP of horsemen were encamped in the Indian country, a small number of men for a position so perilous.

But they were men who had the stamp of the border upon them—men whose names are known the world over in the history of the Wild West of America.

One was a man whose striking appearance stamped him as no ordinary man.

BUFFALO BILL AT LAST WAS IN THE TOILS OF HIS WORST FOE!

It was Buffalo Bill, as he is better known than by his name of William F. Cody.

The perfect type of the true borderman, he was dressed in the costume of the plains, and armed in a way that revealed a man used to firearms, and who had just what he needed, considering his surroundings.

A second of the group was in the fatigue jacket of a cavalry officer, though he wore a broad sombrero, buckskin leggings and looked to be also just what he was, the perfect picture of the plainsman.

On the army register of that date he appeared as Surgeon Frank Powell, U. S. Army, and yet he was better known by the names he had won as "White Beaver," and "The Surgeon Scout."

A third of the party was J. B. Omohundro, whose fame as Texas Jack has gone down in history.

A fourth was a weather-beaten man whose appearance indicated that he had passed his life upon the border. His long hair and beard were tinged with gray and yet he impressed you as being a man of iron—as he really was.

His companions spoke of him as Trapper Dennis.

Another of the group was a person of most distinguished appearance, for he was tall, splendidly formed, and wore no beard.

His short hair was jet black, as were also his eyes, and he was dressed in a full Mexican costume.

The hands of this personage were manacled, and an anxious look rested upon his dark, exceedingly handsome face, while he often cast furtive glances toward a man attired in buckskin and whose dress was also that of a Mexican, though he was in reality an American.

This individual likewise was in irons.

Then there were about a half-dozen scouts and as many soldiers, every one of whom were resolute fellows, ready to retreat or fight at any moment, and expected to do one or the other, judging by their alertness.

Suddenly there came into sight an odd-looking cavalcade, for there were two white men in advance, while following them were a number of Indian ponies, all bearing a rider.

And the riders?

They were women and children, boys and girls, all clad in Indian costume, though their faces revealed that they were whites.

There were a score of them, a browned, haggard-looking lot of captives just released from imprisonment among the Sioux hostiles.

They gazed at the group they were approaching with expressions of gladness irradiating their faces, and had they not been restrained would have uttered shouts of joy.

Riding forward Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill greeted them, the latter bade Texas Jack move on with them and all his men, while the former said:

"Make those two outlaws who guided them here prisoners, Jack, for they must go to prison for a few years for their crimes, though they ought to hang."

"Now, Cody, we will talk with the Don."

The entire mounted party moved on, all save the Surgeon Scout, Buffalo Bill and the two new prisoners in irons.

"Well, Surgeon Powell, I kept my contract with you, so I suppose you are to keep yours," remarked the prisoner already referred to as such a splendid specimen of manhood, as Cody and Powell again rode up.

"Yes; but, Don Eduardo Vincente, I wish it was so that I could take you, as the Deserter Captain, back to the fort and have you hanged as you deserve."

"But I have your pledge."

"Oh, yes, and I shall keep it, of course. My pledge is your safeguard for the present, sorry to say. You came to the fort pretending to be a Mexican gentleman, and there met every courtesy and kindness. In reality you were the spy of the outlaw band known as The Deserters; more and worse, you were their leader and captain."

"As you say that your man here, Dandy Dan, is innocent of any knowledge as to what you were, and I can believe it, I will let him return with us to the fort, setting him free, as I also promised."

"You have purchased your life by sending those two men of your band after the prisoners in the Indian village, while you have great power as a renegade white man."

"You also purchased your freedom by confessing the truth, that Mustang Madge, the Daughter of the Fifth, is the daughter of the Lost Heir, whom those two English gentlemen, Lord Lucien Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder came to this country to find some trace of."

"Through this confession, our little prairie waif, the Daughter of the Regiment, will go to England to become an heiress of great wealth and a title."

"Now, Don Eduardo Vincente, as you claim your name to be, though I am sure that you are an American renegade, I will set you free, and warn you if ever you fall into our hands again you will go out of life at the end of a rope, without judge or jury."

"You are warned; so, now, go your way, go

back to the Sioux with whom you once made your home and over whom you still hold power as Evil Eye, the Great Medicine Chief; but, beware, if ever any one from the fort crosses your path again!"

"Now, sir, mount your horse and go your way."

"May I speak with the man who has been my servant, also my friend?" asked Don Eduardo.

"No, unless you wish me to feel after all that he was your ally, knowing you as you were."

"No! no! no! I alone am guilty; he is innocent. I swear it! I have had a close call, a lesson I will never forget. Rest assured of that. Good-morning, seniors!" and freed of his irons the man touched his sombrero, mounted his horse and rode away into the mountain fastnesses.

"Now, Dandy Dan, I'll set you free, as I promised; but you and these two prisoners go with us to the fort," and unshackling the man who had been Don Eduardo's servant, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill rode on with him after their party.

CHAPTER II.

THE RENEGADE.

THE horseman, who had thus been released by Surgeon Powell, rode on without a backward glance until he came to a mountain spur.

Here he halted, hitched his horse, and going to where the spur ended in a cliff overhanging a valley, he stood, half-hidden among a thicket of dwarf pines that grew upon the very edge of the escarpment.

There he stood for some time, his eyes turned upon the valley, and at last his gaze was rewarded by seeing come into sight the party he had just parted with.

He raised a glass, which he took from his saddle-holster, and gazed fixedly at the party.

"Yes, there goes Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell in the lead, and next come my two men and Dandy Dan."

"I hope they will not hang the poor fellows before I can release them, for rescue them I must."

"Three or four of my men escaped, they say, when the attack was made upon the retreat."

"Well, with those two they will make five to start another band, for The Deserters are not wiped out, Seniors Powell and Cody!"

"Oh, no; you will find that your work was not as thorough as you suppose. The Deserters will again be upon the trails to get gold, for we must live as well as you do, seniors."

"You came very near ending my life, I admit, and had I not possessed the secret I did, that Madge Burton, the chaplain's adopted daughter, was the real heir to the estate of Granger Goldhurst, my life would have been snuffed out at the end of a rope."

"Yes, she is the heir, and my Lord Lucien Lonsfield, and Sir John Reeder, who came here in search of Granger Goldhurst, will take her back with them, where she will become a great heroine."

"A beautiful heroine, too, one whose parents were massacred by the red-skins, and who, a mere child, aided to escape from the Sioux, was picked up on the prairie tied to a horse, and became the Daughter of the Fifth Cavalry, a party of which found her."

"Now known as Granger Goldhurst's heir, she will indeed be a heroine, when she reaches England; but, she is not there yet, and will not get there until Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder pay a ransom for her that will enrich me."

"Oh! but what a blow will I strike at those who believe I am powerless!—that I am an outcast, hastening to seek a refuge among my Sioux friends to escape death."

"Oh no! the sting of Don Eduardo is yet to be felt, my gallant surgeon and scout, and I will strike when you both little expect."

"I played a bold game at the fort, and you two were the ones I feared all the while; but, you do not know the half about me."

"You trailed well to track me as you did, but it was too blind a trail for you to see it all."

"So Amigo, whom you call Dandy Dan, goes back to the fort, does he, as you know nothing to prove him guilty."

"Ha! ha! ha! he is my heir, for I left him what I had there!"

"Well, we shall see; we shall see; and woe be unto you, Frank Powell, and you, Buffalo Bill—yes, and to Texas Jack too, once I get you wholly in my power, for I shall be merciless as Fate itself."

"I did not sell my secret for nothing, oh no! It saved my life, set me free, and you think that will be the end of it! Fools! Why, it is only the beginning!"

He shook his clinched fist after the retreating forms of the scout and surgeon, and turning on his heel, as they disappeared from sight, started as he found himself face to face with a human being, whose presence he had not suspected.

The one whom he beheld was a man of majestic presence, six feet in height, of a compact form, broad shoulders and had the appearance of being of giant strength.

He was dressed in buckskin, moccasins and all, had a belt of arms, a rifle slung at his back

and wore a broad-brimmed dove-colored sombrero.

His hair was worn very long, as was also his beard, and both were as white as snow.

"Who are you that dares thus remain alone in these mountains?" demanded the stranger in a deep, stern voice, as he confronted the Don, showing no fear, nor any hostile intention.

"I know you, old man, as he whom the Sioux call the White Spirit of the Mountains," the Don answered.

"We have never met before?"

"No, though I have heard often of you, and often wished to meet you."

"Why?"

"On account of the power you hold, why, I know not, over the Sioux; for they fear and obey you ever so much more than they do me."

"Do you?"

"So I said."

"And who are you?"

"I am known as Evil Eye, the Great Medicine Chief of the Sioux."

The white-haired man started back in evident surprise, while he gazed fixedly into the face of the one who had just proclaimed himself the ally of the Sioux.

"So you are the renegade, Evil Eye, are you?"

"I am."

"Then go to your tribe and tell them to beware how they go upon the war-path until six moons have gone. I was going to warn them, but do you go; give them the warning, and tell them that the White Spirit of the Mountains has said it!" and the White Spirit of the Mountains turned and strode away through the timber, leaving the renegade chief almost awed by his words and manner.

CHAPTER III.

A WOMAN'S SACRIFICE.

PACING up and down the piazza of a comfortable frontier home in Texas, not many miles from the Rio Grande, was a young girl, lovely in face and graceful in form.

Her eyes were dark and lustrous, her hair of a golden bronze hue that was very beautiful, and her face one full of expression and indomitable will and pluck.

She was well dressed, wore jewels in her ears, and a diamond sparkled upon her hand.

But her face wore a look of anxiety now as she paced to and fro, and her eyes constantly glanced across the prairie at each turn in her walk, as though she was expecting some one.

Presently there dashed into sight a horseman. He was coming toward the ranch and rode like the very wind.

The young girl stopped in her walk, clasped her hands and said earnestly:

"It is Miguel, one of his men."

"Now, I will know all."

On came the horseman, and as he drew nearer it was seen that he was attired in the Mexican costume and his trappings were also of the land beyond the Rio Grande.

"Senorita, a letter from the captain," said the man in Spanish, throwing himself from his saddle and handing her the letter taken from an inner pocket.

"And the captain, Miguel?"

"There is no hope, senorita," was the low reply, and the man's voice quivered with emotion, while he pointed to the letter.

"I almost dread to open it," she muttered.

But with set lips she broke the seal and read what was therein written, and which was as follows:

"There is no hope, so I am doomed."

"I am to be shot to-morrow night at twilight."

"Heaven bless you, my darling, is my last prayer."

"Farewell."

"LEON."

The face of the young girl paled and she bit her lips to keep back her emotion.

Then she said:

"When did you leave your captain, Miguel?"

"At noon to-day, senorita."

"Had all given up hope?"

"Every one, senorita."

"Will you be allowed to see him again, to take a line from me?"

"I will see him, senorita, but I will not be allowed to give him anything, not even a letter from you."

"Then get supper here, Miguel and a fresh horse, and return to your captain."

"Say to him that I send farewell, and one word—hope."

"Yes, senorita."

The Mexican then led his horse around to the rear of the ranch, while the maiden placed a whistle to her lips and gave a shrill blast.

A servant appeared, a young negro boy.

"Jet, go and tell Mustang Harry to go to the Vincent Ranch and say to Mr. Vincent that I desire to see him at once."

"Yes, missy."

"Tell Mustang Harry that he must go with all speed."

"Yes, missy."

"And have Mammy Dinah give the Mexican messenger Miguel a good supper."

The little negro departed upon his double

errand and the maiden began to pace to and fro once more.

Thus an hour and more passed away, but she seemed not to tire in her walk, and at last said, as her eyes fell upon a horseman coming at a gallop down a trail leading along a stream:

"He is coming."

"Will he accept my terms, I wonder?"

"I will soon know."

The horseman rode with the ease of one at home in the saddle, and looked just what he was, the Texas rancher.

He was dressed in a handsome riding-suit, top-boots, spurs and sombrero, and was a man to command admiration anywhere.

He doffed his hat as he drew rein before the piazza, and tossing his bridle-rein to Jet, dismounted, and ascended the steps.

"You sent for me, senorita, and in haste?" he said.

"Yes, for I have news that the captain is doomed, that he is to be shot at twilight tomorrow."

"I expected it, when it was discovered that he was a conspirator."

"He must not die."

"No power can save him now."

"Yes."

"No."

"I say yes," was the imperious reply.

"They would not heed even your pleading, senorita."

"Well, I know that; but you can save him."

"I save a Mexican officer, who has been proven a conspirator, from being shot?" asked the rancher in surprise.

"Yes, if you will."

"He is my rival, senorita, and one who met success when I failed in gaining your love and the pledge of your hand."

"You have said that you loved me, sir?"

"With all my heart and soul I do."

"Prove it."

"How can I?"

"Save the man I love from death."

"Impossible!"

"Senor, let me ask you now if you are ready to do what once you said you would?"

"What is that, senorita?"

"To make me your wife without my love?"

"I am willing to do so this very instant, senorita."

"Then go and save his life, and return here with the Padre Francisco, and I will become your wife."

"Do you mean it?"

"Upon my honor, yes."

"But alas! how can I save him?"

"You know who will be his executioner?"

"Captain Sebastian, of course."

"And that man is your slave, it is said."

"I have a certain power over him, senorita."

"Then go to him and arrange that he shall not die though he be marched out to the scene of execution, the firing take place and all."

"You understand what I mean, and you can arrange it with Sebastian, for nearly all the men are his friends."

"Will you do this for me?"

"For your hand in marriage?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"When Father Francisco brings me proof that he has not been slain, though the execution has taken place."

"A paradox, senorita."

"You understand it, sir."

"And I accept your terms, senorita," and the man bowed and went toward his horse, while the maiden muttered:

"And I accept the sacrifice."

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONSPIRATOR.

ACROSS the Rio Grande a sad scene was transpiring.

A sad scene, for it was one of death, and worse than all, the one to die was a gallant officer who had won a name in battle, and for the daring and dash with which he led his men, known as the Lasso Lancers, for in addition to their revolvers and lances they carried lariats at their saddle horns, a dangerous weapon in skillful hands.

A man of fine physique, with a face to command admiration, the captain of the Lasso Lancers sat in his prison with the brand of conspirator upon him.

He had been tried by a court-martial of his brother officers, and the decision had been that he must die.

He had been sentenced to death, to be shot upon the evening of the day when he is presented to the reader in his cell.

His courage has not left him, for his face is calm and there is no expression of dread, of fear, resting upon it.

The hours are creeping away but he does not flinch, and he glances up in an indifferent way as steps approach his cell.

Suddenly the door swings open and a man enters, attended by two guards.

These place themselves in the door while the visitor steps forward and grasps the manacled hands of the prisoner, while he speaks in Spanish.

"My dear *amigo*, I have been permitted by the commandante to come and say good-by to you."

"Cheer up, for it will soon be over."

"The fear of death, my dear sir, does not enter into my soul."

"I shall face it as I have a hundred times before."

"I am guiltless of the crime with which I am charged, and simply am sacrificed to save those higher than I."

"I submit to my fate, and I thank you for coming to see me, for I remember that we have not been friendly in the past."

"Two men can no more be friends, both loving the same woman, than can two women under similar circumstances."

"But I feel no hostility toward one who looks down into his own grave, whose hours, yes, minutes are numbered, and hence I have come to say farewell."

"And I appreciate it."

"Nay more, I beg that you will go to the scene of my execution and behold me die, that you may say to her whom I love better than my own soul, that my face did not blanch, my form showed no coward fear."

"Will you be there?"

"I will."

"Now, farewell."

Their hands were grasped again in farewell, and the visitor turned quickly away.

But he had left a tiny bit of paper in the palm of the doomed man's hand.

Then away he marched with the two guards. Seeking the military quarters of Captain Sebastian the Texan entered like a familiar friend.

The Mexican captain sat at his breakfast, and welcomed his visitor with a look as though he was forced to welcome him.

"Ah! it is you, senor. I am rejoiced to see you."

The Texan laughed.

But it was a laugh that plainly said as so many words would have done:

"Sebastian, you lie!"

"Sit down and have some breakfast."

"That is one reason I have come, senor, for I have been up for several hours attending to business."

"I arrived late last night and called but could not find you."

"Indeed, you should have made yourself at home here until my return."

"Thank you, but I sought other quarters; but you have a disagreeable duty to perform today."

"In what respect?"

"Is not the conspirator captain to be executed today?"

"Oh, yes, at twilight."

"To be shot?"

"Yes."

"By your men?"

"Eight of them."

"You are to command, eh?"

"Oh, yes."

"A public execution?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Well, the conspirator is a very popular man and has the sympathy of many of the soldiers and people."

"So it is to be private?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not in the prison, or barracks."

"Ah! where then?"

"He is to be driven in a closed *volante* to the scene of execution."

"Where is that?"

"I do not know that I should tell you?"

"Do you recognize this?"

He handed over a paper as he spoke.

"Yes, a permit from the commandante to witness the execution."

"Exactly, so where is it to be?"

"At Execution Canyon upon the Rio Grande."

"I see, ten miles above here."

"Yes."

"How many troops are to be there?"

"The guard of six with a lieutenant, the execution platoon, twelve officers and twice as many men selected from the different commands as witnesses, and the surgeon who is to pronounce him dead."

"I see, no others?"

"I go in command, of course."

"And it is not a painful duty to you?"

"Why should it be, when I hate the man?"

"True, I had forgotten that."

"It will be rather a pleasure then?"

"Yes."

"Well, here is a permit from the commandante that Padre Francisco is to attend as the spiritual adviser of the doomed man."

"So be it, I do not care," was the indifferent remark of the Senor Captain Sebastian, as he sipped his coffee.

CHAPTER V.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

"Now, Senor Sebastian, as I have broken my fast, and we can devote ourselves to our *cigarritos*, I have something to say to you," said the

Texan, quietly, after the captain's Mexican servant had been dismissed.

"Well, senor?"

"I wish to tell you that this conspirator is not to die."

The Mexican captain sprung to his feet in amazement.

"What do you, can you mean, senor?"

"Just what I say, he is not to die."

"But, I have my orders, and the papers have been signed and sealed from the commandante in chief down to me."

"Oh, yes, that is all regular, and as it should be; but I repeat what I say that he is not to die."

"Has he been pardoned?" and a look of anxiety swept over the face of the officer of execution.

"No."

"I do not understand you then, senor."

"I will be most explicit, Captain Sebastian."

"I hope that you will."

"Are there any ears near to hear what may be said?"

The captain arose and went through his quarters.

"No one, senor."

"Well, you are aware, I believe, that the conspirator was my rival for the hand of a fair Texas girl?"

"Yes, and with him out of the way you will win now."

"Whether I will or not is not for you to consider; but you must know that I have no love for the man."

"I can understand it."

"Yet I tell you that he must not die."

"Yet it must be."

"I say no."

"How can you prevent it?"

"I will tell you."

"You keep me in great suspense, senor, as to what you mean."

"You are to command the military execution?"

"So I told you."

"You have a platoon of eight men?"

"Yes."

"Have they yet been detailed?"

"No."

"There are men in your company who like the conspirator?"

"Too many."

"They would be glad to save him if they could, especially if they got a year's pay for the act."

"I am utterly ignorant of what you are driving at."

"Well, these men are not to be given their charges of powder and ball."

"Five muskets are to be loaded with ball, three are not, and you do the loading of the guns."

"Yes."

"Well, put no bullet in any gun."

"Senor!"

"I say put no bullets at all in the guns, but at the discharge the conspirator falls and lies like one dead."

"Upon his heart is the red stain, where the bullets have been supposed to have cut their way to the seat of life, and the surgeon steps forward and pronounces him dead."

"The witnesses turn away satisfied, the band strikes up a lively air and marches away, leaving the eight men of the platoon to bury the body under your supervision."

"But here I have an order from the commandante to turn the body over to Padre Francisco for burial elsewhere, in the home of this Texan maiden, while the coffin is to be buried in Execution Canyon and all will suppose that the conspirator lies in it."

"See?"

The Mexican made no reply, but his face was flushed with anger and indignation.

"Father Francisco and I carry the body across the Rio Grande in a *volante*, and there the form of the conspirator revives, he mounts a horse and in disguise rides away, nevermore to be seen in Mexico."

"And carries the Texan girl with him?"

"Oh, no."

"Why not?"

"She becomes my wife."

"Ha! this is your pay for your work?"

"Exactly."

"Well, you have come to the wrong man to ask for aid in your accursed plot."

"I do not think so."

"What! you insult me to my face?"

"Sit down, Sebastian, and keep cool."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, for I know just the man to do this work, and that is yourself."

"Senor, I—"

"Beware, for you know I am not a man to trifle with, and a word from me will cause your execution to-night while the conspirator captain goes free."

"You forget, senor, that my grip is upon your throat, from what I know of you, and that I can hang you this very day if so I will."

"Now, I demand that you carry out my plot."

"The surgeon I will see and bribe, for I know him well, and he owes me a thousand pesos now."

"I will forgive him the debt, and hand him a couple of hundred pesos besides.

"You owe me large gambling debts, also, and I will cancel those, too.

"Your execution squad need not know even that they do not kill their man, for you can arrange to slip into his breast a small skin bag filled with blood.

"With a penknife open in his hand, when the shots are fired, he can cut the skin, and that will flood his breast with the crimson tide of life, the surgeon will pronounce him dead, and you and your squad will remain to see Father Francisco and myself wrap in *serapes* and bear him away in our *volante*.

"See, you have the whole plot before you, and no one will be the wiser save you, the padre, the prisoner and myself.

"Now, what do you say, Senor Captain Sebastian?"

"I refuse!" was the decided response of the Mexican.

"All right; then I shall go to the commandante and denounce you for what I know you to be."

"Hold! I yield!" cried the terrified officer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE EXECUTION.

THE conspirator captain was surprised at the visit of one whom he had deemed his enemy, for having won from him the love of the beautiful Texan maiden, he felt that he must be hated by the man who now came to bid him farewell as a friend might have done.

When he had gone with the guards, he stepped to the window and regarded the slip of paper left in his hand by his visitor.

It was but a couple of inches wide, and twice as long, when unfolded, and written upon it in English was as follows:

"I have pledged myself to save your life.

"Father Francisco and myself will be at the execution.

"Not one of the guns is to be loaded with ball, and you are to be given a skin filled with blood, and knife to cut it, to smear your breast when you fall at the volley.

"The surgeon will be bribed to pronounce you dead, and the padre will bear you away for pretended burial.

"Aid the plot all in your power, now that you know what it is to be."

"My God! can this be a cruel hoax?

"No! no! no! it must be true, as he says, for even my worst foe could not thus raise my hopes to dash them down in the end.

"And I am to live?

"To live that I may love and claim the beautiful woman that I love?

"Can I not see in this her work?

"Yes, I feel that it is her plot to save me.

"Heaven forever bless her.

"Yes, I will carry all out as this letter states.

"Let me read it again, stamp it upon heart and brain, and then destroy it, that other eyes may not see it.

"But why should he, above all men, be my friend?

"I do not know, I do not care; but all I do know is that I am to live."

He read the paper twice over again.

Then, bit by bit he tore it to pieces, and placed the scraps in his mouth to chew them, that no particle could be found to tell against him.

Before the hours had flown rapidly, but now the moments even dragged to the hopeful man.

Miguel, the messenger, had returned, and he had bade his captain farewell.

That privilege had been allowed him.

He had visited the prisoner just a short while before the coming of the Texan, and he had said:

"The senorita told me to say to you one word, senor—*Hope!*"

Now he understood it all, for the fair Texan intended to save him.

So the day passed on, and his guards were surprised to see a man under the shadow of death partake of a good dinner, light his *cigarrito* and sip his coffee complacently, as though his day of doom was not upon him.

But he was calm and even cheerful, and the guards shook their heads, and whispered together about his wonderful nerve.

So the day passed and the sun sunk nearer and nearer its horizon.

Suddenly there came footsteps in the long corridor, an officer appeared with a subaltern and a guard, and the former said:

"You are to come with me, Senor Captain."

"I am ready, senor," was the calm response.

Out of the prison they went, and there stood a closed carriage.

Into this they got, the officer and prisoner on the back seat, the under officer and soldier on the front.

Away rolled the vehicle with its curtains down and the road to the country was taken.

The pace was a rapid one, for the day was slipping away.

At last the vehicle turned into the river road, and after a short drive wheeled into a canyon.

The scene was a wild one, a spot where many a traitor had been executed, many a life had gone out in that wild canyon.

There were gathered in the canyon a number of mounted men, all in uniform with two exceptions.

Those two were a priest in his robes and the Texan who had laid the plot to have the prisoner escape death.

The latter was as indifferent as though he held no interest in the proceedings.

A group of officers in gay uniforms were there, and then there were soldiers in the different dress of the army corps.

All were quiet and serious-faced.

As the captain alighted with his prisoner every eye was upon the face of the conspirator.

He held himself upright, was in the full uniform of his regiment and his look was as serene as a May morn.

Here and there he saw a familiar face and nodded and smiled as though nothing of unusual moment was to take place.

He saw there the Texan, and the padre came forward and greeted him, walking by his side to the open grave, at the head of which stood the coffin.

The captain commanding led the way with the guard, the execution platoon, under a lieutenant following.

Then the others formed three sides of a square around the grave.

Of course there came to the prisoner the thought that after all he was to be killed; but Captain Sebastian, his face whiter than that of the prisoner, stepped to his side, placed him in position, and thrust something, unseen to others, into the breast of his coat. Then he stepped aside, as the Mexican conspirator captain placed his hand, still being ironed, as were his feet, into his breast and said distinctly:

"Adios, senors!

"I am ready for death!"

A sharp command from the officer of execution followed, a volley of musketry from the platoon, sending many an echo back from the canyon walls, and the conspirator captain sunk to the ground in a heap.

CHAPTER VII.

HER PLEDGE KEPT.

A HUSH fell upon the officers and men after the volley of firearms, and the echoes died away up the canyon.

Then the surgeon stepped forward, straightened out the form of the conspirator, and placed his hand upon his pulse.

There upon his breast was the red stain, where the bullets had torn their way.

The veterans stepped forward and gazed upon the form of the conspirator.

The surgeon jotted something down in a notebook, rose, and saluting Captain Sebastian, said:

"I pronounce him dead, senor."

Captain Sebastian turned to the witnesses and said:

"You have heard, senors?"

They bowed, and the order was given to leave the spot.

The captain still lingered, and said:

"I have orders, Senor Padre, to turn the body over to you.

"The guard can bring the coffin intended for the body."

This the guard set to work to do, while the padre and the Texan wrapped the body in two *serapes* and placed it in the vehicle in which they had driven to the canyon.

The grave was filled in, and a board painted white, with black lettering upon it, was placed at the head.

It gave the name, age and rank of the conspirator, and afterward followed the words:

"EXECUTED FOR CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT."

"So Perish All Traitors."

Then the captain saluted the padre and the Texan and walked away to his carriage in the gathering gloom, while the guard mounted their horses and followed.

The form of the conspirator was then resting in the carriage, and entering it the padre and the Texan drove away, the latter driving.

They crossed the river at a ford some distance above the canyon, and once upon the American shore came to a halt.

"Senor Padre, yonder is the camp," said the Texan, and a light glimmered through the trees ahead.

Here the vehicle was brought to a halt and a man advanced from the timber.

"You have the horses ready, Harry?"

"Yes, senor," was the reply of the man.

Then the Texan began to unwrap the *serapes* and soon the form of the conspirator was free.

"Senor Captain, you are a free man.

"I have saved your life."

"You have my deepest gratitude, senor.

"Never can I forget you.

"Your plot was perfect and was accomplished without a suspicion of wrong.

"Senor Padre, I thank you too."

"You are to go from here, my son, with all dispatch, for with the coming of the morrow you must be far away," said the padre.

"And whither am I to go?"

"Here is a bag of gold for you, and here letters of credit upon San Francisco.

"The money is your own, drawn from the bank as you requested, to devote to other ones, as you expected to die; but which, living, you will need.

"The world is before you, so seek a home elsewhere, and beyond the reach of your foes."

"But I am guiltless of any wrong, padre."

"Did the court not condemn you to death as guilty, so why argue the point of innocence when it will do no good?"

"True, I wear a brand nothing will ever efface."

"Then go where no one knows you."

"And leave the one being I love in this world?"

"She bids you go."

"I cannot believe it."

"Here is what she has written you."

The Texan handed to the Mexican a letter. He broke the seal and read:

"I have saved you, through the aid of others.

"Go your way through life apart from me, for never must we meet again, as I will it so.

"Do not seek me, for I will not see you, for from to-day our paths in life run different ways.

"My every hope for your prosperity and happiness attend you.

"Farewell, for henceforth I am as lost to you as though you had been put to death in Execution Canyon."

The Mexican fairly staggered under the blow he received in reading those few lines.

Then he said in a low, earnest voice:

"Padre, and you, my good senor, I would this moment rather be dead than have my life darkened as by those words.

"I was not guilty of wrong, but suffered because others were and the crime was laid upon me.

"Now I must go my way through life without her who I hoped was to become my wife.

"Is it a wonder that I am embittered with life, now that I have no hope for the future?"

"Alas! I go my way, I obey her command.

"But whither do I go, and for what purpose?"

"Heaven only knows."

"Senor, life is not so cheerless as you suppose, for you have over five thousand dollars there in money, and a comfortable outfit here, for I have brought you two good horses, clothing, disguises, weapons and provisions and a camp outfit.

"When you are far from here you will see the bright side of life, so do not despair, but go your way with hope.

"Now do not delay, for you must not, as it may be fatal to you.

"Farewell, senor, and Heaven bless you," and the padre held forth his hand to the broken-hearted, despairing man.

CHAPTER VIII.

EXILED.

FOR full a minute the Mexican captain made no reply.

Then he grasped the outstretched hand of the padre and said:

"I thank you, father—farewell."

He turned to the Texan and continued:

"And you know, senor, that I thank you, too, and to you I say farewell."

The Texan grasped his hand and made no reply.

"Tell her that I obey her command, senor.

"I can do no more."

He turned to the horse which the man now led forward.

He was a fine animal, equipped with handsome saddle and bridle, saddle-bags, lariat and rolled *serape* behind the cantel.

The other horse was well loaded with a pack, and his lariat was fast to the horn of the riding horse.

The Mexican adjusted his stirrups to his liking, mounted and raised his sombrero.

"You will find other clothing and all you need in the pack-saddle, senor," said the priest.

He made no reply, but with uncovered head rode away in the darkness.

Then the padre turned to the Texan.

"Well, senor?"

"You are to go with me now, padre."

"I am at your service."

"But his fate is a hard one."

"Some must weep, senor, while others laugh."

"True, but his has been a hard fate."

"Not so hard as it might have been."

"You mean that he might have died?"

"Yes."

"I am not so sure that to a man of his spirit death were not preferable, to lost honor, branded by crime I believe he is guiltless of, and now driven off by the woman he loves."

"He will come out all right, padre."

"I fear not, for he is just the man to lose faith in life and go the bad."

"Let us hope not."

"Amen!"

With this the padre entered the *volante*, the Texan sprang in after him, and seized the reins, while the man who had brought the conspirator's horses to the spot, put out the camp-fire and mounted his own horse, and went his own way.

Away at great speed drove the Texan along the trail.

At last after a drive of a couple of hours, a distant light came in view, and it was not long before the *volante* drew rein before the door of the ranch where lived the Texan maiden who had saved her lover from death by the sacrifice of herself.

Jet, the negro boy, had retired, but an old negress ushered the visitors into a cozy library, and there they were soon joined by the maiden.

She was very pale, but calm, and was dressed, to the surprise of the Texan, in deep black.

She greeted the padre and then bowed to the Texan, while she said with an anxious look:

"Is all over?"
 "He did not die, *senorita*."
 "Thank Heaven for that at least."
 "My plot then was successful?"
 "Wholly so, *senorita*."
 "And no one suspected?"
 "Not one, *senorita*."
 "And he has gone?"
 "He has."
 "I am glad."
 "But what said he?"
 "That he obeyed your bidding."
 "He was given my letter then?"
 "Yes, I gave it to him."
 "Did he suspect the truth?"
 "In what respect, *senorita*?"
 "That I was to become your wife, *senor*?"
 "He did not."
 "And do you still hold me to my pledge, *senor*?"

"I assuredly do, *senorita*," was the determined response.

"I shall keep my pledge, *senor*; but come, I have waited supper for you and the padre."

She led the way to the supper room, and the meal prepared was one to tempt an anchorite.

The drive had given the Texan and Mexican padre an appetite, and they ate heartily.

But the maiden barely touched her food.

At last she arose from the table and said:

"Padre, I believe that you are aware that you have been brought here to perform a ceremony which makes me the wife of this gentleman?"

"Yes, *senorita*, and I trust that there is no compulsion on your part that influences you?"

"None; I willingly keep my pledge to become his wife, but upon certain conditions."

"Conditions, *senorita*?" quickly asked the Texan.

"Yes, for I stand to-night in the position of a widowed woman, one who has lost her heart's idol."

"It is to me as though the man who was condemned to die had been put to death."

"See, I wear for him a mourning garb."

"When my season of mourning is over I will send for you to come to me, *senor*, though to-night I become your bride."

"Until I send for you our paths must not meet again."

"I am ready, on those conditions, *senor*, to become your wife."

The Texan's face revealed his anger; but he saw that the maiden was determined in her resolve, and more, he was sure that the priest would sustain her in it, so he bowed to the inevitable, with as good a grace as possible, and said:

"I yield to your wishes, *senorita*."

"Thank you."

"Now, padre, I will call my witnesses."

And into the room were called the old negress and her husband.

Then the two so strangely to be united stood before the priest and were made man and wife.

The two witnesses attached their rugged signatures to the document, and ten minutes after the Texan was driving furiously back toward the Rio Grande, the padre seated in silence by his side.

The fair Texan had kept her pledge to sacrifice herself, but her husband, the man who had mercilessly held her to it, was an exile from her home and heart.

CHAPTER IX.

WESTWARD HO!

SEVERAL years after the strange marriage of the Texan maiden, to the rancher who had demanded of her the sacrifice, a party of a dozen persons were going along a trail of the far West, and were already beyond the boundary line of civilization and within the line of deadly danger from the roving bands of Indians.

There were a couple of ambulances along, one of which was well-stored and driven by an old negro, by whose side sat a negress.

The other ambulance was driven by a man in cowboy attire, and was fitted up like a Gypsy wagon with every comfort for travelers.

Both ambulances were drawn by five large mules, and the cowboy driver's horse was led behind the vehicle he drove.

Behind these came half a dozen mounted men of the cowboy type, and ahead of the party rode a man whose dark face and jet-black hair would indicate Mexican origin.

He was handsomely dressed, had a refined face, and though known to his comrades as Half-Breed Harry, looked the gentleman.

A short distance in the rear of this man, who seemed to be the guide and leader of the party, rode two horsewomen.

One was a handsome, well-preserved woman of fifty apparently, the other a young girl, beautiful in face and form, and who sat her horse with exquisite grace.

At her saddle-born hung a lariat, a repeating rifle was swung at her back and a revolver was in the belt about her slender waist.

Her face was darkly bronzed from exposure, her eyes large, black, expressive and at times full of dreamy sadness.

That the two were mother and daughter there was no doubt, and the former seemed wholly subservient to the will of the latter.

Suddenly the maiden said:

"I am going to ride on ahead, mother, and ask Half-Breed Harry more about our border home."

With this she rode up to the side of the guide, whose face lighted up at her coming:

"Harry, I want you to tell me more about the home you have selected for us upon the frontier."

"We are yet a score of miles away, *senorita*," was the answer, with an accent in his English.

"Then we cannot reach there to-night?"

"No, *senorita*, not unless we travel late."

"Well, what of the place?"

"I thought I had told you all, *senorita*."

"Tell me again."

"It is almost an island, for the river, a foaming torrent, encircles it except at the narrow neck where we enter it."

"The banks are high, and there is no possible way of reaching the ranch except by the narrow neck, across which the men are now building a high stockade wall, in which there is a gate to lower and raise with a windlass."

"There are some thousands of acres in the island with fine meadows for grazing, timber and good soil."

"Not far from the stockade entrance is the ranch, which I had built according to your plans, *senorita*, and as the wagon-train arrived some weeks ago all will be ready for you and your mother, while the well-guarded lands, surrounded by the river, will cause you to need hardly over half a dozen cattlemen at the most."

"And how far off is our nearest neighbor, Harry?"

"Fort Beauvoir is our nearest neighbor, *senorita*, and that is a dozen miles away, unless we cut through a ridge which is known as Skeleton Gap, as a wagon-train was massacred there once, but which all shun as the soldiers and Indians say the place is haunted."

"Well, that is the first place I will seek, as I wish to see a ghost."

"But there are no other neighbors?"

"Only the ranches close around the fort, *senorita*."

"And who are at the fort?"

"The present commander is a new man, Colonel Loyal, and there are dozens of officers and their families, with several hundred soldiers."

"Then there are some settlers near the fort, and a village, a settlement to the north, where a very hard lot of citizens dwell."

"Well, we shall hold aloof, Harry, for I came here to seek a hiding-place."

"Bah! speaking of Skeleton Gap being haunted, just see how my life has been haunted for years," and the maiden spoke bitterly.

Then she added after a while:

"Well, Harry, I must say that you have done well, for I am charmed with your description of my new home, and I know I shall like it, in spite of the wild land we are settling in."

"It would be far worse, *senorita*, if the fort were not so near, and then such men as Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack and the officer known as the Surgeon Scout keep the Indians from coming this far from their mountain retreats."

"Buffalo Bill, Texas Jack and the Surgeon Scout?"

"Yes, I have heard of them all as famous plainsmen."

"They are indeed, *senorita*, and men to be feared."

"But then there are other foes we will have to dread besides the red-skins."

"And who are those, Harry?"

"They are the outlaw band known as The Deserters."

"Ah! deserters from the army who have turned outlaws, I suppose?"

"Yes, *senorita*, so they say."

"And a merciless, bad lot they are, raiding ranches and settlements, and holding up the coaches and trains upon the trails."

"We will be fortunate if we manage to elude them, and that is why I came this unfrequented trail, *senorita*."

"You are ever wise and cautious, Harry."

And as the words left the lips of the maiden, there came the loud command from ambush:

"Halt that train, and hands up, all!"

CHAPTER X.

THE DESERTERS.

A BAND of men were grouped together in a trail leading into the wilds of the far West.

The trail was but faintly marked, and yet had been trampled in the past by vehicles.

The men were a party of a dozen in uniform.

But their uniforms varied, for several were of the artillery, others of the cavalry, and the balance of the infantry.

All wore boots, however, and spurs, as though mounted, and all had carbines and belts of arms.

Not far away, hidden among the rocks, were their horses, all fine animals, and with military saddles and bridles upon them.

The men were a mixture of races.

There was a negro, a Mexican, a half-breed Indian, a couple of Irishmen, a Dutchman, and the rest were Americans of the border type.

They looked like men to dare any danger in a bad cause, and that is just what they would do, for they were the outlaw band known as The Deserters.

At last one, who wore an orderly sergeant's stripes upon his arm, said:

"They should be along now, and yet the captain has not come."

"Something has detained him; but I suppose you will hold them up whether he comes or not," said a man wearing a corporal's stripes upon his arm.

"Oh, yes, I'll do that; but I wish the captain was here."

"So do I; but, sergeant, isn't it strange how we know nothing about our captain?"

"What do you want to know about him, so long as you get well paid for your services? He finds the work for us to do, tells us just where to go and hide after each time we hold up a coach or train, and cares for us in splendid style, paying us when we are idle and only calling upon us when we are needed."

"Now what more do you want to know, corporal?"

"Well, I've never yet seen his face."

"Who of us have?"

"Have you?"

"No."

"Well, I confess I'd like to see the face of a man we serve so blindly."

"If he does hide his face, he don't shun danger, corporal."

"Oh, no; he's plucky enough."

"But here is a man who is our captain, who sends us orders in some mysterious way to be at a certain point."

"We go, and you send out a scout who reports a coach, train or travelers coming, so we go into ambush."

"Before those we are waiting for come along, up rides the Deserter Captain."

"Where he comes from none of us know, and he keeps us under a military discipline as strict as possible."

"Well, he gives his orders, we obey, the work is done, we get our pay and the Deserter Captain disappears, none of us know where, after telling us where to go."

"Now, where has he come from, where does he go?"

"I don't know."

"That is just what I should like to know."

"Don't be too inquisitive, corporal."

"But I intend to be."

"I advise you for your good."

"Well, I won't serve a man any longer whose face I have never seen."

"I tell you, I believe he is some army officer who is robbing on the sly to get money for his extravagant way of living."

"I wish to know, for though I would not betray him, as none of us would, still I wish to know who he is and all about him."

"Better be warned."

"I won't be, for if he is some young settler, or army officer, I wish to know it, that is all."

Just then a man rode up who saluted the sergeant and said:

"They are coming, sergeant, but had to bridge a creek for the two ambulances, so will not be along for ever two hours."

"All right; we have a good position here, and can wait."

"Then the captain will have a chance to get here also," said the sergeant.

"And have time to give an account of himself," the corporal said.

"Do you intend to question the captain, corporal?" asked the sergeant, somewhat anxiously.

"I certainly do."

"If you has got good sense, yer better not," the man remarked who had come in from the scout and made his report to the sergeant.

"It is because I have got good sense that I intend to do so."

"Why?"

"I wish to follow no leader blindfolded."

"Leave the band, then."

"You know our laws, that death alone can take a man out of the band unless the captain dismisses him, or retires him."

"Well, what have you to complain of?"

"I have just been telling the sergeant that I wish to know who he is?"

"What good will it do you?"
 "Much."
 "In what way?"
 "I'll know who I am following so blindly."
 "Well, I am content to follow a man I does not know."
 "So I said," remarked the sergeant.
 "He has made no mistakes, has paid us most generously, has never disappointed us, and all he asks of us is blind obedience to his laws."
 "Well, I am not alone in my wish to know who he is."
 "Granted," said the sergeant.
 "I would like to know, but I am not going to let my curiosity run me into odds with the captain."
 "Nor will I," said the scout.
 "I will, for I will follow no man's lead who is afraid to show me his face."
 "Well, there he comes, and my advice to you, corporal, is not to make the mistake of your life."
 "Well, I shall unmask him, and then I am Captain of The Deserters," was the reply of the corporal, whose words showed that he had ambition to rule the band.

CHAPTER XI. THE CAPTAIN.

INTO the view of the outlaw band came a horseman along the trail.

He rode a black horse, a spirited animal, that cantered along with arched neck and proud step.

He was equipped with a military saddle, housings and bridle.

The rider was in the uniform, epaulettes and all, of a captain of cavalry.

The rider wore gauntlet gloves, with a letter D embroidered upon each gauntlet in red.

He had a red sash, a gold belt, handsome sword and a couple of revolvers.

But strangest of all he wore upon his head a helmet with the visor down, completely shielding his face.

In the helmet waved a scarlet plume, and altogether horse and rider were a grand make-up.

The sergeant had sprung to his feet at sight of the captain, his men did likewise, and in an instant they were in line, their carbines at a present.

Along came the Deserter Captain, drawing his horse to a walk as he approached, and whipping his sword suddenly out of its scabbard he gave a salute.

Then he dismounted and one of the men stepped forward to take his horse.

"I am a trifle late, sergeant, but from the appearance of your men the train is not very near at hand," he said.

"No, captain, my scout reports that a temporary bridge had to be thrown across a stream and that the train will be a couple of hours late."

"I am glad of it for I am very tired and will be able to get an hour's sleep."

"Have you placed your men?"

"Yes, sir, they all know their posts."

"And their horses?"

"Are all in position, sir, though staked out."

"Send a scout ahead on foot then, to come back to give you timely warning, for your horses must be ready, and there must be no mistake."

"Yes, sir, I will have all ready."

"What does the scout report the force?"

"A guide, sir, half a dozen mounted men, one driving an ambulance, a negro man and woman and two ladies."

"Some officer's family on the way to the fort, doubtless, though my spy reported them as settlers, but said he thought there was money in the outfit."

"There may be, sir."

"But I will send the scout at once."

"Here, sergeant, let the corporal go, for he will understand just what to do."

"I have no objection, captain, to going as a scout, but I wish to have a talk with you first," said the corporal.

All had heard the bold words of the corporal before the coming of the captain, and now every eye was upon him at his response, to see what he would do.

Thus far he had begun boldly.

There were others, too, of the band who would like to have seen their captain's face, to have known who he was.

But they preferred to let the corporal be the pioneer in making the discovery.

"Well, corporal, this is no time for talk, but I'll make an exception in your case and hear what you have to say," said the Deserter Captain.

"Well, captain, the fact is we are banded together for gain, and mutual interest and protection, though of course you get the lion's share of all we make."

"And am entitled to it as the one who plots, plans and protects you, while I take the biggest chances of danger," was the quiet response of the captain.

"Granted all that, captain, but you know who we are."

"Well?"
 "You know us as we are, and yet we do not know even whether you are white, red or black."
 "Nor do I intend that you shall."
 "Is this square, captain?"
 "I consider that I have a right to suit myself in this matter, and I am not responsible to any man for my actions."
 "But we are responsible to you."
 "And shall so remain."
 "I don't know about that."
 "What do you mean?"
 "Well, I for one, do not believe in following the lead of a man who is either afraid or ashamed to show his face."
 The words were boldly uttered, distinct and heard by all.
 The Deserter Captain had every eye upon him as he made answer:
 "Well, corporal, this is insubordination upon your part, and I could kill you in your tracks did I feel so inclined."
 "But as you apply to me the word fear, I will show you that I am willing to risk my life against yours."
 "Sergeant, step off twelve paces, and place us that distance apart."
 "At your command we march toward each other, firing as we advance."
 "If I fall the corporal will have his wish gratified of seeing my face."
 "If the corporal falls then I shall have the pleasure of getting rid of one who has no claim to be one of the band of Deserters."
 "Now, corporal, I am wholly at your service."
 "And if you fall I shall be captain in your stead," cried the corporal.
 "That will be for you to settle after my death, with the sergeant, for he is next in rank," was the cool reply of the Deserter Captain, who quickly drew a revolver from his belt and walked toward the position assigned him by the sergeant.

CHAPTER XII. THE DUEL.

THE sergeant had paced off the distance, named by his captain, and had marked out the positions where the two duelists were to stand.

He could not but cast a glance of triumph at the corporal, a look which plainly said:

"I warned you, did I not?"

But the corporal seemed more than satisfied with the arrangement.

He had been a soldier, and was in reality a deserter.

He was one of those men who have unbounded confidence in themselves, a conceit which often carries the day with them.

A dead shot, a man of ambition, fighting with a man who had not yet revealed his face, he saw no reason why the chances of victory were not with him.

In fact the idea of defeat hardly entered into his calculations.

So the corporal, with a self-satisfied smile stepped to his position.

The arrangements were that the sergeant should give the word, and the men were to draw and fire, advancing as they did so.

This the corporal had urged.

The sergeant took his stand, the men ranged themselves in a line where a perfect view could be obtained, and all eyes were bent upon the Deserter Captain.

Somehow that helmet-hidden face had a strange attraction for them.

The corporal they saw and knew.

But what man did that brass helmet hide from their view?

The corporal kept his face wreathed in his smile of confidence and was as cool as an icicle.

The captain certainly showed no anxiety, whatever he might feel.

The stern face of the tall sergeant was impassive.

"Are you ready?"

The sergeant had also been a soldier and his voice had a sharp, military ring to it.

"Ready," promptly assured the captain while the corporal responded:

"Ay ay, all ready."

"Draw and fire!"

With the words the right hands of the two men dropped upon the revolver upon their right hip, and it was noticed that the captain's movement was as quick as a flash of lightning.

In fact he had his revolver out and at a level before the weapon of the corporal, quick as he was, had left the holster.

It seemed that the Deserter Captain took no aim, for his weapon flashed as it came upon the level, and with the one shot was returned to his belt.

Then the captain turned upon his heel without a single glance at his adversary, who had fallen with the crack of his revolver.

"In the center of the forehead, sir," said the sergeant, admiringly.

"Oh yes, I know it; but, sergeant, send your scout on the trail to see where the train is, and get that body out of the way under ground."

"I am going to lie down for an hour's sleep,

unless the corporal has some friends in the band who are also curious to see my face."

"Not another man, sir, and I gave him free warning that he was a fool," said the sergeant.

The Deserter Captain then went to his horse, staked him out, took his serape from behind his saddle and spreading it upon the ground threw himself down to rest.

In a moment, almost, he seemed to be sleeping sorely, while the men sitting apart were discussing the very cool manner in which he had checked the curiosity of the corporal.

The scout was sent ahead by the sergeant, and within little over an hour he returned with his report.

"The train is about two miles distant now, for I came back on the jump."

"They are close together, and the guide is in advance with one of the ladies riding by his side."

"The other lady is riding in the leading ambulance with the negro woman driving, while the negro man is driving the second ambulance, the cowboy having mounted his horse again."

Such was the scout's report, and the sergeant at once got the men ready.

Half of them were sent to the rear to come in behind the train when halted, while the other half under the Deserter Captain, and himself would remain in ambush in front to hold up the train.

The nature of the ground, and the position was such that the train could be held up with no danger to the robbers.

When all was in readiness, and the sergeant felt that the train could not be more than half a mile away, he went and aroused the captain.

He had only to speak to him to bring him at once to his feet.

"Well, sergeant?"

The sergeant explained the situation as reported by the scout.

"Sergeant, you have done well."

"So has the scout, so make him corporal in the place of the man I killed."

"Yes, captain."

"And you hold them up, sergeant, while I stand ready to ride out and bring them to terms."

"Yes, chief."

"All must work smoothly, sergeant, for those men are cowboys, and will, perhaps, show fight, unless they feel that we have all the advantage on our side."

The sergeant was prepared for flight or fight, he said, and the Deserter Captain retired to his position to await the result.

A few moments more and the warning came that the victims were in sight, and soon after the rumble of the ambulance wheels was heard.

Then came into sight a horseman with a fair rider by his side, the rest following close upon their heels.

"Halt that train, and hands up all!" and loud, rung the sergeant's deep voice as he uttered the ominous and startling command.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DOUBLE RECOGNITION.

THE guide and his fair companion, the two ambulances and the cowboys came to a sudden halt.

The cowboys had half wheeled, as though to dash back upon the trail, but from behind them came the command:

"Hold, there, you are covered."

"Hands up!"

This caused them to halt, and they glanced toward their guide.

"What is to be done, Harry?" said the fair rider in a tone wholly unruffled.

"They are The Deserters, so have a large force, and are in ambush, senorita."

"Then we must submit?"

"I can see nothing else to be done, senorita," was the disconsolate reply of the guide.

At once the maiden replied and said:

"Make terms, if you can, Harry."

"Ho, who is it that halts us?" cried the guide.

"The Deserter Captain and his men," responded the sergeant.

"What do you want?"

"Gold."

"We are poor settlers and have no gold."

"You have that which will bring ransom."

"What do you mean?"

"Women."

"You make war upon women then?"

"We make war upon men, women and children for gold."

"You can get no gold from us."

"It is your gold or your life."

"We are poor, I told you."

"The outfit gives you the lie."

"Well, you have the power, so we can but submit; but you will find that I speak the truth."

"Who are you?" called out the stern voice of the Deserter Captain.

"Honest settlers."

"Where bound?"

"To the Island Ranch, near Fort Beauvoir."

"Then you are rich and must pay toll on this

trail," and the Deserter Captain rode forward, while the horsewoman said in an excited tone:

"Harry, did you hear that voice?"

"Yes, senorita."

"There can be no mistaking that voice," and the maiden spoke in a low, anxious tone.

Just then the Deserter Captain rode forward. He held his horse well in hand, and a revolver was in his grasp, ready for use.

His eyes roamed over the train, taking in the outfit at a glance.

Then he drew rein in front of the guide and the maiden.

The latter was very pale, but calm, and her eyes met his as they peered through the helmet upon her.

She saw him start, rein back his horse and then spur to her side, while he cried:

"By Heaven! I have found you at last, Bessie Bond—yes, at last, at last, after a long, long search."

"Yes, Edward Vincent, you have found me, and I find you the chief of an outlaw band, he who is known as the Deserter Captain."

"Well, it is just what I expected of you, sir."

Her words were scathing, and her look did not flinch.

At once he seemed to be cowed by her words, for he replied quickly:

"I knew not that it was you, or your train should have gone by unmolested."

"Now that you do know me, what then, Edward Vincent?"

"Sh! Do not speak that name here, for not one of my men know me."

"You wear a mask, I see," and she spoke with a sneer.

He seemed anxious and ill at ease, for he said quickly:

"You can go upon your way, for I know where to find you and we will meet again, Bessie Bond."

She made no reply, and wheeling his horse he rode back to cover while he called out:

"Men, these people pass on their way."

The guide lost no time in availing himself of the permission and rode forward at once.

The maiden, without a word kept by his side, and the ambulances followed, the cowboys bringing up the rear.

The Deserters were amazed.

What did such an act of humanity in their captain mean?

They could not account for it.

And on filed the train until it passed out of sight.

Then the captain rode out of cover once more, and called out:

"Men, come here."

They all assembled near him.

"At the last moment I recognized in those people one whom it would not do to rob or to kill."

"Did we do either in their case, then this border would be made too hot for us, and steel and lead, yes, and hemp, would we get instead of gold."

"Under these circumstances I allowed them to pass upon their way."

"I do not, however, wish you to lose by their going, for, could we have taken the prize within our grasp, we would have found it a rich one, so I give to the sergeant a few hundreds in gold to divide among you."

"The sergeant also reports that the man I killed had five hundred dollars in his belt."

"You are heirs to the fortune he has left."

"Scout, I make you corporal in his stead."

"Sergeant, here are instructions for our next meeting, and I hope it will prove more to your liking than the prize I have just been forced to allow to slip through our fingers."

The sergeant at once called his men into line, they presented arms, and the Deserter Captain rode by them, saluting as he did so.

The Deserters received their share of gold from the sergeant, that given by the captain, and taken from the dead corporal, and appeared content.

Then the sergeant read his instructions, appointing the next rendezvous, and the band mounted and rode away as silently as ghosts.

And on the trail of the train went the Deserter Captain, though he was careful not to get too close.

"Yes, I have found her, and soon she must answer to me face to face," he muttered, as he rode along.

CHAPTER XIV.

FACE TO FACE.

THERE was quite a stir at Fort Beauvoir, when Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts, came in and reported that the new ranch, called Ranch Isle, was to be occupied by two lovely ladies, a mother and her daughter.

The scout had met the ladies near their new home, and had rendered them a slight service by telling them how to round a canyon without going miles out of the way.

He had described the mother as a lovely-faced woman, and the daughter as "a beauty."

They had had built for them a commodious

and comfortable home, and the narrow neck of land was defended by a stockade wall and cabin where the cowboys were to camp.

They had with them a couple of negro servants, their household effects had come on ahead, and the place was to be the best on the border.

Of course it was wondered at that two ladies of refinement, as the chief of scouts described Mrs. Bond and her daughter, should seek a home in the western wilds, yet nevertheless they had done so.

They had the ranch well stocked with cattle, horses, sheep, hogs, and fowls, the scout said, and a garden plot had been fenced in and planted, so the new-comers to the border were to have a model home.

So it was decided at the fort that the officers and their wives should call, and the fair pioneers were to be considered as quite an addition to frontier society.

A party of ladies and gentlemen therefore rode over from Fort Beauvoir, one afternoon some two weeks after the arrival of the Bonds at Ranch Isle.

Colonel Loyal had already sent his quartermaster over, immediately upon their arrival, offering the services of his men in any way, and they had been courteously declined; but the quartermaster had but given proof that Buffalo Bill knew a pretty girl when he saw one, and reported that:

"Bessie Bond was as beautiful a maiden as he had ever seen."

The party from the fort had just been halted by the cowboy guards at the stockade, but were soon admitted.

They found the occupants ladies, that was certain, and both mother and daughter charmed the visitors.

But each said that they had come to the border for rest and quiet, and though they would visit the fort, they expected to live the lives of a recluse, almost.

In vain did the people of the fort try to draw them into the social whirl, for they would not be more than polite, now and then going over to a parade or entertainment, yet never encouraging return visits.

Thus several months passed away, and one day Bessie Bond rode over to the fort alone after the mail for Ranch Isle.

She had been surrounded by the fort officers, all of whom wished to escort her home, yet she declined each and every offer.

"But it is not safe, Miss Bond," urged one, "for you to go alone."

"Why not, for I have a horse as fleet as the wind, I am armed and I know every step of the trail."

But Bessie Bond made one visit at the fort.

This was upon "Mustang Madge, the Daughter of the Fifth," as she was called.

This maiden was the wife found as a little girl upon the prairie by a squadron of the Fifth Cavalry, and adopted by Chaplain Ben Burton and his lovely wife and been still considered the Daughter of the Regiment.

Madge was considered the best rider, dearest shot, most expert-lasso thrower and a skillful scout, as well, for she had no superiors in her border accomplishments, while she was a refined, graceful, beautiful little maid as well, and beloved by all at the fort.

Bessie Bond had taken a great fancy to her, and at her home only did the Border Belle, as the lady of Ranch Isle was called, visit.

After a short visit to Madge, Bessie Bond started for home alone.

Madge had urged against it, but Bessie was determined, so rode away, with the young officers casting many a wistful glance after her.

She had gone but half the distance when she saw a fresh trail turning into the one she had taken to the fort.

The trail was left by a single horse, and was not an hour old.

Bessie Bond was a skillful plainswoman herself, and she read signs readily.

"A shod horse, and he has come from down the valley."

"That would indicate that he has made a flank movement from the fort to head me off."

"He surely has had time since I went to the fort."

"Now who is he?"

"Why, he can be but one person."

She rode on more cautiously now, and when she drew near a clump of timber through which the trail ran, drew her horse to the right, to make a flank movement around it.

"I know too much to ride into that timber and catch a lariat around my neck," she muttered.

As she was flanking the timber she kept her eyes fixed upon it.

Soon she espied a horseman coming out of the timber directly toward her.

He was well mounted, his horse handsomely comparisoned by a Mexican saddle and bridle.

The rider was in the costume of a Mexican ranchero of the better class, and was very richly and handsomely attired.

His face was dark, his eyes intensely black, and he did not look unlike a Mexican, though his form was one of splendid physique and he looked like a man of great strength.

His face any one would have been attracted by, and his manners were courtly and winning.

As he advanced toward the maiden he seemed to expect to see her dash away.

But instead she turned her horse to confront him and said in a defiant tone:

"Well, Senor Edward Vincent, *alias* Don Eduardo Vincente, the Mexican, we again meet face to face."

CHAPTER XV.

THE RUNAWAY WIFE.

THE man seemed amazed at the manner of Bessie Bond.

It took him aback.

He had expected a different look and other words, not defiance.

"Yes, we are again face to face, Bessie Bond Vincent, *for you are my wife.*"

"Oh, I do not deny it, for all was proper and regular in the ceremony performed by Padre Francisco."

"Why did you run away from me?"

"Do you dare ask that, Edward Vincent?"

"Yes, I ask it."

"Well, I'll tell you."

"Taking advantage of my mother's and brother's absence, you served me upon conditions."

"I asked you to do so, I grant."

"I asked you to save the life of Captain Leon, and told you, if you did so, I would become your wife."

"My mother and brother were away from the ranch, when he was under sentence of death, and I was able to carry out my plans without hindrance."

"You saved the conspirator captain, aided him to escape from the country, and then came straight to our ranch."

"You brought with you Padre Francisco, and he married us, and you know the conditions, that you were not to claim me until my time of mourning was over."

"Well, you got into trouble and had to fly from Texas: but I learned from a secret source that you intended to kidnap me."

"My brother had mysteriously disappeared, and so my mother, in alarm, urged that we should leave Texas and hide from you."

"We had a good offer for our ranch, sold it, sent Half-Breed Harry, as you know the man who helped you rescue the conspirator captain, to find us a home."

"He is true as steel and has been our chief of cowboys since I last saw you."

"He found the home you know as Ranch Isle, drove our cattle there, built a most comfortable cabin and then came for us."

"On the way, in almost sight of our new home, which we were seeking to hide from you, we met you."

"I saw you at the fort, and heard you called Don Eduardo Vincente, a Mexican gentleman of wealth."

"I heard you speak with your slight foreign accent, and yet I never betrayed you."

"I knew that we must come face to face some time, and we have done so."

"Now, what is your wish, Vincent, or Vincente, as you please to be called?"

"My wish is that you allow me to visit you at stated times, to appear like a courtship, and then that you marry me again."

"I marry you again."

"For appearance's sake, I ask it."

"Oh, no, I am known as Bessie Bond, and so shall remain."

"Not if I claim you as my wife before all at the fort."

"You must have heard that I have inherited a fortune since we met."

"Have you?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, from some mysterious kinsman of whom I knew nothing, I have gotten a very handsome legacy, and it is banked for me in the East."

"You must have heard of this, as you are so persistent to claim me."

"Oh, no, I never did, and I do not believe it."

"But I shall claim you as my wife all the same."

"Not if I refuse."

"That will make no difference."

"Will it not?"

"None."

"You are determined?"

"I am."

"Well, I refuse."

"Then I shall let it be known at the fort that Miss Bessie Bond is my runaway wife."

The girl burst forth into a hearty peal of laughter, and the man looked annoyed.

"You seem amused."

"I am."

"I am in deadly earnest to claim you."

"So am I in my refusal."

"All right, I shall go to the fort and tell the truth."

"I will go with you and tell the truth."

"What will you tell?"

"That Edward Vincent *alias* Don Eduardo Vincente, *alias* the Deserter Captain—"

"My God! what do you mean?"

"Simply that unless I am left alone as Miss

Bessie Bond, and you keep away from me, I will go to Colonel Loyal and tell him that you are the secret masked leader of The Deserters.

"Do you understand, my husband?"

The man flinched under the words as though he was suffering pain, and when he looked into her face he saw that she was just the one to carry out her threat.

So he said:

"See here, Bessie, I wish no trouble with you, and I do not wish to drive you into an acknowledgment that you are my wife, unless you desire to have it known."

"I do not intend that it shall be known."

"I like this country, so does my mother, and though we could go to the East, to Europe if we wish, and enjoy a life of luxury, for we have the means, I prefer to remain here, as she does."

"Before the world I am Bessie Bond and so intend to remain."

"Before the world you are Don Eduardo Vincente, and if you wish so to remain you must pledge yourself to keep clear of Ranch Isle."

"We are to be as strangers, except we meet at the fort, and we must so continue."

"If aught comes up that I need to consult you in any way, I will find a way to communicate with you."

"You are an outlaw and should be hanged; but I do not wish to have my husband die upon the gallows."

"You keep my secret, and I will keep yours."

"Betray me, and you hang for it."

"What do you say?"

"I can but agree to it."

"You are wise," was the significant reply, and she was turning her horse to go on forward, when he called earnestly to her to remain a moment longer.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WOMAN'S HOPE.

BESSIE BOND haltingly turned her horse at his call and asked:

"Well, sir?"

"Can I not escort you home?"

"No, sir, I accept no escorts."

"One question."

"Well?"

"Will you answer it?"

"I will."

"Truthfully?"

"I am not one to lie, Edward."

"I will have to trust to you, then."

"You can do nothing else."

"Have you seen the conspirator captain?"

"Since when?"

"His rescue by me?"

"I have not."

"Have you heard from him?"

"I have not."

"Do you know where he is?"

"I do not."

"You are truthful?"

"I am."

"You can give me no information regarding him?"

"I cannot."

"Do you believe he is alive?"

"I do not know."

"What do you think?"

"To the world he is believed dead, and in reality he may be."

"That is all you know?"

"All."

"Suppose he were to seek you out?"

"Well?"

"Would you receive him?"

"I would receive him as a friend."

"Do you still love him?"

"I do."

"You are my wife."

"That, I can never forget."

"Yet you would meet this man whom you love."

"Oh, no, I would shun him, would not wish to meet him."

"But he has done me no wrong, I love him, and if I met him I would treat him as I would my brother. I would never forget that I am the wife of another, even though I hated the man to whom I was bound."

"You hate me, then?"

"I admired you, liked you, when I knew you as a Texas rancher and believed you to be an honorable man."

"I felt very sorry that I could not return your love."

"Then you saved the life of Captain Leon, and yet you claimed the fulfillment of my pledge to you."

"Had you refused then to force me to keep my pledge, I might, having given Leon up, have loved you."

"But you showed your cloven foot, and so it was, when I discovered that you were said to be the secret leader of a band of horse-thieves in Texas, that I sought to hide from you."

"I even heard that my poor brother had discovered your secret, and that is why he never returned, that he lost his life."

"No, no, your brother was not killed, for he is alive now."

"Where?"

"In Mexico."

"Do you know this?"

"I do."

"Can you prove this?"

"If I do, will you then become my wife before the world?"

"I will not."

"Then your brother can remain where he is."

"So be it, for if he is dead that ends it, and if not, he will one day find us, for he will receive word how to do so, word already left for him by one who is faithful."

"Now you are answered, Edward Vincent."

"Well, so long as the conspirator captain does not look you up, I will have to be content."

"It would not be well for him to do so, for then I am sure he would make me a widow."

"Two can play at that game, my dear wife."

"Very true; but it was a mere thought of mine that he would not be pleased to know the terms upon which he was rescued from death."

"A word of mine to the Mexican Government that he was not dead, would put the bloodhounds of the law upon his track."

"Very true; and a word of mine to the Governor of Texas, where Edward Vincent could be found, would put detectives upon your track, while a word to Colonel Loyal that the Deserter Captain was at Fort Beauvoir, would hang you before they could get you back to Texas."

"No, no, Edward, if the conspirator captain is tracked, you shall go to the gallows, for you alone can and would betray him."

"Have you more to say, Edward?"

"Bessie Bond, you are a perfect devil."

"Thanks, and I could return the compliment, but will not, as I would not wish to wound the feelings of His Satanic Majesty by so vile a comparison."

"We will meet again, my husband, and often, I expect."

"But remember my warning," and kissing the tips of her fingers to him in a way that was most provoking Bessie Bond wheeled her horse and dashed off homeward at a rapid gallop.

She reached her home with flushed face, but set lips, and seeking her mother told her of the interview.

Then she said:

"Now mother, brother is not dead, and that man knows it."

"Threats will not make him betray the truth, so we must be, after a fashion, friendly with him, of course as Don Eduardo Vincente only."

"But I shall plot in my own way, to find out all he knows of brother; but rest assured that he is not dead, that he will yet come to us."

"Heaven grant it, my child."

"But oh! how our lives have changed of late, and cruel circumstances which we could not control, have almost made us wicked, I fear."

"First, your poor father went on the downward road, and now lies in prison for life."

"Then you loved that splendid, but unfortunate Mexican officer, who saved our lives, and saved your father from the gallows, and see what a sad fate was his."

"Next came your unhappy marriage to Edward Vincent, who was a villain."

"Then your brother disappeared most mysteriously, and we have mourned him as dead."

"We fled from our old home to come here, and we meet Vincent leading a double life, and yet dare not betray him."

"My child, when the hearts are laid bare how little good do we behold in them."

"Cheer up, mother, for though I am imbibed, almost wicked, I believe all will come right in the end," was Bessie Bond's cheering response.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FRONTIER POST.

MONTHS passed on at Fort Beauvoir, and still the Bonds seemed as hard to get acquainted with as before.

"The Don" still held sway, in his comfortable cabin home outside of the stockade walls, and over near the settlement, no one dreaming that he was living a double life.

Now and then Mrs. Bond and her daughter would appear at the fort, to accept an invitation to an entertainment in Social Hall, or they would ride over on a Sabbath to hear Chaplain Burton preach in the same hall, for the place was a resort for all ceremonies, entertainments and services occurring at the fort out of private quarters.

Not much had been heard of late as to the lawless acts of The Deserters, and excepting that the Indians sent out bands on the war-path now and then all was comparatively quiet along the frontier under the command of Colonel Loyal.

In the settlement outside of the fort matters went on about as usual.

There was the regular lawless gang there, with teamsters, bordermen, miners, stagemen and a few who were willing to work hard for a livelihood.

At night the settlement with its bar, stores and gambling saloons, was wont to be a trifle hilarious, yes even lawless, and a man now and then was killed and little thought of it.

"Emerald Ed" was the genius who presided over the grand gambling saloon there, known as

the Devils' Acre, and he was a noted character in his way.

Then there was a presiding genius in the way of a woman who appeared only at night, and of whom nothing was known.

She always wore a half mask, was called Keno Kate the Faro Fairy and was an enigma to the army officers and all who knew her.

What tie there was between Emerald Ed and Keno Kate no one knew.

The woman was said to be beautiful, as far as her masked revealed her face she was, and she was known to be a most successful gambler.

What became of her by day, where she passed her time no one knew, but she was a wonder and a mystery to all.

Of course Colonel Loyal could take no cognizance of what was going on in the outside settlement, so long as the acts of the denizens did not conflict with the military.

But the officers were wont often to go there and play, many a poor young fellow to his sorrow, when he dared trust his luck against that of the Faro Fairy and when they were paid off much of the money of the enlisted men went in the same way.

Likewise it was with the trainmen, the miners, ranchers, cowboys, pony riders, scouts and dwellers upon the border.

All were wont to tempt the fickle Goddess of Fortune, as represented in the person of Keno Kate, and seldom was it that one could claim to be successful.

Emerald Ed was the master of the place, and he was growing rich it was said, though he seldom touched a card himself.

Keno Kate was the faro-dealer and mistress of the gambling-tables, but naught more was known regarding her.

Of Fort Beauvoir it need only be said that it was considered the most delightful post upon the frontier, and there was certainly a very fine class of officers there, while their families were genial and fond of the enjoyments which fell to their lot.

Thus were matters progressing when there arrived at the fort two distinguished visitors.

One was Colonel, Lord Lucien Lonsfield, of the British Army, the other Captain Sir John Reeder, also an officer in the English service.

They were accompanied by one valet, who was glad to answer to the name of Blazer.

The two officers brought letters from the general-in-chief of the American Army, and from others, asking Colonel Loyal to do all in his power to aid them in all that he could, as they had come upon a special duty.

This duty was the finding of a lost heir.

The heir, Granger Goldhurst, had also been an English officer, but when in India had been led into a duel with one who fell by his hand, and leaving the service he had departed from England forever, he said.

He was a kinsman of both Lord Lonsfield and Sir John, and if he could be found, he was the heir to a vast estate and a noble title in England.

"If not, and he had never been married, then the title and estate must go to Sir John Reeder, with a large money consideration to Lord Lonsfield."

Both these English officers were splendid fellows, had been greatly attached to the missing heir, and sought to find him for his own good, sinking all desire to benefit by his death themselves.

The lawyers had traced the missing heir in his wanderings, and at last lost him in a mining-camp of the Rocky Mountains.

Then the two English officers had taken a hand in the search, and to find Granger Goldhurst was what had brought them to the frontier.

Stating their case to Colonel Loyal, he had called to their aid Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Frank Powell, and these two noted plainsmen, aided by Captain Alfred Taylor, and his troop of cavalry, were to go in search of the missing heir.

But before departing upon their mysterious and perilous mission, Colonel Loyal had decided to give his guests an insight into the pleasures of the wild West, and buffalo-hunts, catching wild ponies with the lariat, and other sports, were gotten up for their enjoyment.

After an exciting buffalo chase at the fort, to the surprise of all, an invitation came through Don Eduardo Vincente, from Bessie Bond and her mother, for a day of sport, to be held at Ranch Isle, an invitation which was gladly accepted by all who were invited.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FATAL SHOT.

A HORSEMAN halted by the roadside, as though to go into camp for the night.

He was well mounted and equipped and had sought a halting-place on the bank of a small stream and where he could find wood in plenty and good grazing for his horse.

After staking the animal out, as it was some time yet before sunset, he climbed the steep sides of a mountain ridge and scaling the summit stood gazing down into the canyon a hundred yards below where he was standing.

His eyes fell upon a small log hut, and from the chimney came a curl of smoke which went far upward to melt into nothingness as it reached the upper air.

Suddenly, as the horseman gazed down into the valley a man came out of the little cabin and began to take from a pile of wood a number of sticks.

With his arms full he started upon his return to the cabin, when suddenly, from a thicket near came a puff of smoke, a sharp report, and the man with the wood staggered and fell heavily.

Then out from the thicket bounded a form, rifle in hand, and he ran toward his fallen victim.

But from the summit of the ridge another shot rung out and the murderer dropped in his tracks.

It was the horseman who had fired the second shot.

Down the ridge he went to where he had left his horse, and mounting he rode rapidly around the spur, up the canyon, and dismounting near the cabin he walked toward the man who had been shot from ambush.

He found that the bullet of the assassin had not killed his victim, for he had turned over and dragged himself to the support of his cabin door.

There he leant against the logs, gasping for breath, while his life-blood oozed away.

As the horseman had come up the canyon he had seen him, and his eyes had followed him as he dismounted and approached him.

Then the eyes of the two met, recognition was mutual, and two names were uttered:

"Noel Norcross!"

"Captain Leon Alvarez!"

Then the hands of the two were clasped, but the grasp of the wounded man was very slight.

"Oh, Noel, my friend, you are wounded."

"I stood up there on the ridge, gazing down into the canyon, saw you come out of your cabin, though I did not see your face and little dreamed that it was you."

"Then came a shot from yonder thicket, and I saw you fall."

"Yes, with a fatal wound; but there was a second shot."

"I fired it from the ridge at your assassin."

"And—"

"Killed him, for he lies yonder."

"A Mexican, who has dogged me for a long, long while, I am sure."

"Yes, he was a Mexican; but let me see what I can do to help you, Senor Noel."

"Nothing, for I have received my death-wound."

"No, no; do not say that."

"It is true."

"I will see, at least."

"It is here," and he placed his hand upon his right side.

"Great God! I fear it is fatal."

"I know that it is; and while I live, let us talk together."

"Do you know I feel as though I was talking to your ghost, for I believed you dead."

"So do all others, Senor Noel; save four others whom I can name."

"They told me that you were executed."

"So I was, and yet you see I live."

"You were not in your sister's secret, then?"

"My sister's secret?"

"Why, I have not seen her since I heard you were arrested and thrown into prison as a conspirator."

"Do you mean this?"

"It is true."

"You were not home when I was supposed to have been executed?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"Senor Captain, when I heard of your arrest, I saw that it so hurt my sister that I determined to try and save your life."

"I was told by one if I would go to the commandante of the province that I could plead with him, and he would spare your life."

"Well, my noble friend, I can guess the rest."

"What?"

"You went, were arrested and thrown into prison there to die."

"Yes, I was thrown into prison, but I managed to escape with one other, a young Mexican officer who was also under sentence of life-imprisonment."

"We had been told by the guards that you had been executed, and when we made our escape, we were mere vagabonds for we had no money, little clothes, no weapons, in fact nothing."

"We suffered greatly, but made our way northward into New Mexico, and reached the mines."

"Then we set to work for others, and at last got enough together to buy an outfit for ourselves, and started in to work in our own behalf."

"We staked a claim, built this cabin, and have been doing far better than we anticipated, for we have laid up several thousand dollars."

"Feeling that I was thought to be dead by those at home, I decided that it was my duty to

return home, and I was going soon, Leon also intending to accompany me, for we have about worked out our claim."

"Leon!"

"Yes, my prison friend, and who, I forgot to tell you was your kinsman, and bears the same name as yours."

"Leon Luiz, you mean?"

"Yes, you recall him?"

"Oh, yes, we are cousins, and the poor fellow suffered on my account, for he was supposed to be a conspirator with me."

"Alas! what a cruel charge against men who are innocent, for we are, and you were, yet suffered for me."

"This is terrible! terrible! my poor Senor Noel."

"But how did you escape?"

"Through your sister's aid, and one whom I believed my foe, Edward Vincent."

"A fine fellow, and just like him; but when did you see my mother and sister last?"

"Not since you have, for I am an exile, supposed to be dead, as you will know when I tell you all."

And then the conspirator captain told the story of his escape, and how he had been sent into exile by Bessie Bond.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TEXAN'S LEGACY.

THE wounded man was deeply impressed with all he heard from the conspirator captain.

The mother of the Mexican officer had been a Texan, and he spoke English without an accent, it having been the first tongue she had taught him.

He had been the warm friend of the young Texan, engaged as he was to his sister, and it had been to try and save him that Noel Norcross had gone to Mexico, and, led into a trap by one who wanted him out of the way, had been thrown into prison.

The rest of the story is known to the reader from his own story of the imprisonment and escape, along with the kinsman of the conspirator captain, and who had borne his name.

That his wound was fatal the young Texan knew, and he seemed to understand just how long he had to live.

"I am growing weaker, senor, and must talk more rapidly."

"I am glad to have heard your story, though I cannot understand why Bessie should have driven you from her after saving your life, through Vincent, whom I feel she urged to carry out her plans, for he was deeply attached to her."

"I can only think that it was to get you well away from Mexico, where there was a possibility of your being recognized and recaptured."

"Now I wish you to go in disguise to our home and seek her."

"It is your duty, for you owe it to her to tell of my death, and how I died."

"Tell my sister and mother how you avenged me by killing my assassin, and more, take to them the money I have saved up, excepting half, which I leave to you."

"No, no, senor, I have money and I will accept no gold from you."

"I am sorry, but you must then take it to my mother and sister."

"You will promise to do this?"

"I will."

"Remember, senor, your promise is to a dying man."

"I will keep it."

"I feel that you will."

"But now, as I was not feeling just well, your cousin went to buy for us a couple of horses to start upon our way, for he was going with me."

"He should soon return, so you will see him, and my advice is to cling together."

"Luiz is arrogant, perhaps; has his faults, but he is a good fellow, is a man to tie to in trouble, and you should keep together."

"But let me tell you one thing."

"Yes, senor."

"You, as Leon Luiz Alvarez, you are dead, and I have a legacy to leave you if you will accept it."

"Well, senor."

"We are said to be strikingly alike, and you know that upon the Rio Grande we were often mistaken the one for the other."

"Yes, senor, it is very true."

"Now you are to go to my house, to my people, so you must go as myself."

"Yourself, senor?"

"Yes, for I leave you a legacy in my name."

"You are, the moment I am dead, and you will not have long to wait, to become Noel Norcross, if you will."

"Ah! senor, you leave me an honor in your surname that I can but cherish and prize."

"I will accept the legacy, senor, and I will be as a brother to your sister, if she will not let me be more, as a son to your good, sweet mother."

"Thank you for those words, senor, for they cheer me in my dying hour."

"I shall feel better now, for I will know that in you my sister and mother have one to care for them."

"But I must urge you to leave Texas, so have them go far from there, for sorrow and misfortune only have we felt in the home that we all loved so well."

"Yes, take them far away, where you will be in no danger of your life, where they will be content."

"Ah! I hear the call of my partner—your cousin is coming."

A loud halloo rung through the canyon now, and soon after there rode into view a horseman. He had two horses in lead, one equipped for a rider, the other with pack-saddle.

A large and fierce-looking dog trotted at the side of the rider, and the wounded man said:

"It is our dog, Guard."

"Had he been here with me, instead of going with Leon, then that assassin would never have given me this death-wound."

"But did you look to see if you had really killed him?"

"I did not look, senor."

"But I killed him, for you may remember that I am a dead-shot."

"Oh, yes, and that you are the best lariat-thrower in Mexico, I really believe."

"Hark! Guard scents that assassin," and with savage yelp the dog went bounding up the hill and in a moment after had sprung upon the dead body of the assassin.

Leon Luiz, the Miner, for he was so known, hastened up to the cabin now, and beheld the sad scene that he so suddenly came upon.

"My poor, poor comrade," he cried with deep emotion and with an accent in his speech.

He grasped the hand of his dying companion, and then turned to his cousin and warmly greeted him, while in a few words the conspirator captain explained the situation to him.

Then he ran to where Guard still stood over the body of the assassin and cried:

"It is as I feared, the Mexican whom we have seen before, and who has been dogging our trail so long, Noel; but oh! can something not be done to save you?"

"Nothing, my wound is fatal," was the low reply of the young Texan, and he cast his eyes wistfully at the treetops on the ridge, where the last rays of the setting sun were still visible.

CHAPTER XX.

COMRADES ON THE TRAIL.

THE night came on in the lonely canyon, and the two cousins, having staked the horses out and left Guard the dog on sentinel duty, moved the wounded Texan into the cabin, where a bright fire was built.

And there by his side they sat as the night dragged slowly away, the dying man now and then talking rationally and again his mind wandering to scenes in his early life.

At last he said in a low, distinct tone:

"I have one request to make."

"Yes, my friend," said the Mexican captain.

"It will be asking much, I know, but I wish you to bring my mother and sister here to this spot, to see my cabin home, to behold my place of work upon my gold claim, to see themselves where I lived and to look upon my grave."

"His mind is wandering," said Leon Luiz in a whisper.

"It may be, but I shall fulfill his request, as I know his mother and sister will when they hear it."

"You hear my request, comrades?"

"Yes, and it shall be as you wish," was the low response of the conspirator.

"Yes, we will bring them here, your brother and sister, comrade," responded Leon Luiz.

"I thank you both," was the low reply.

Thus another long silence followed, and at last the dawn began to fade the firelight.

Then through the open door came a stream of sunlight and it fell upon the face of the dying Texan.

"Your hands, comrades," he said firmly.

A moment after, in the faintest of tones he said:

"Good-by."

Then the grasp of his hands relaxed, and the conspirator captain said softly:

"He has gone."

And a tear, which his own sufferings and peril had never wrung from him, fell upon the upturned face of the dead, as he gently folded the pulseless hands across the broad breast.

And to the door crept Guard, and looking in drew near his dead master.

He put his nose close to the face, touched the cold cheek, and raising his head gave one long, mournful howl, his wail of sorrow at the loss of a friend.

Then the body was wrapped in blankets and a grave was dug upon the banks of the stream, amid a clump of sighing pines, and the remains of the gallant young Texan were laid in their last resting-place.

Some distance down the canyon another grave was dug, and the body of the assassin was consigned to it with no feeling of pity.

"Leon, I know this man," said the conspirator.

"Who is he, Noel, for by that name now I must call you, as it was his wish."

"It is a man who was once cowboy chief on Senor Edward Vincent's ranch in Texas."

"His name was Garcia, and he was said to be a very bad man."

"Well, his evil deeds are at an end now, with your bullet in his brain," was the reply.

"Yes, I only wish I had seen him before he fired that shot."

"If you only had."

"But what is to be done now?"

"We must pack our gold-dust and traps, clean up our weapons, fasten up the cabin and get away upon our trail."

"Yes, we can make an early start to-morrow."

"That will do."

"And our trail leads to Texas?"

"To the home of one whom Noel told us would tell us of his mother and sister, and communicate with them for us, for neither you or I would dare go to the Norcross Ranch."

"Not unless we courted certain death," was the answer.

So the two set to work to prepare for their long journey.

They packed the gold-dust in skin bags, got their weapons in perfect condition, and as they had two horses now to be used as pack-animals, were able to spare the extra weight of traps upon those they rode.

Bright and early they set off upon the trail, making for the place in Texas where lived the person who could tell where the mother and sister of the Texan could be found.

It was a couple of weeks before they reached the place, and there Noel Norcross sought out the home of the man who had once served on the Norcross Ranch as cowboy chief, but who had married and turned from a wild life to teaching in a frontier village.

He had seen the Mexican officer at the ranch, and had heard of his execution, so the captain decided to make a clean breast of it, well knowing that he could trust the man with his life, from his devotion to the family he had served so long.

He told him of his escape through Bessie's act, and of his wanderings, to at last come up with Noel, only in time to see him die, though he had avenged him.

Then he made known the wish of Noel that he should go to seek his mother and sister.

The ex-cowboy chief seemed deeply moved by the death of the young Texan, and said:

"I taught the boy to ride and shoot, and he was as game as a Comanche Indian."

"But how much you are like him, sir, and it will be a comfort for the mother and sister of Noel to have you come to them."

"But they have sold out the ranch, sir, and gone to the Northwest, while they have dropped the name of Norcross, taking Mrs. Norcross's maiden name of Bond."

"They came to see me, and told me that they had left word at the old home, sir, for Noel to look me up when he came back, for they confidently expected him."

"You will find them, sir, near Fort Beauvoir, a long way from here, and their home is known as Ranch Isle, while they have changed their name, remember, to Bond."

CHAPTER XXI.

MET ON THE TRAIL.

It was certainly not a very safe plan to go roaming about the frontier with thousands of dollars in gold-dust with them, and so Noel Norcross—as I will now speak of the conspirator captain—decided that it was best to seek some town where it could be disposed of and the money banked, excepting so much as was needed for their own use.

They accordingly carried this determination out, and were thus detained a couple of months before they could again start upon the trail to find Ranch Isle.

Discovering just where the military post of Fort Beauvoir was located, they concluded to seek it from the south, as they wished to have it thought that they had come from Texas.

After weeks upon the trail they camped one night within a few miles of Ranch Isle.

They had just gone into camp when they saw a horseman coming along their trail.

He came cautiously and with apparent expectation of riding into an ambush.

Noel Norcross at once turned his glass upon him and said:

"See, Luiz; there is a splendid specimen of manhood."

"I will show myself, that he may not feel that he is going to ride into an ambush, for our trail evidently looks very suspicious to him."

"Yes, he is a handsome fellow, and is doubtless an officer from the fort," answered Leon Luiz, also watching the approaching horseman through his glass.

Noel Norcross now stepped into view and at sight of him the horseman came on at a canter.

As he approached, the two Mexicans saw that he was over six feet in height, possessed a superb physique, wore buckskin leggings, an embroidered hunting-shirt, a belt of arms, top-boots and a sombrero with the widest of brims.

He had a rifle slung at his back and a lariat hanging from his saddle-horn.

His hair was long, he wore a mustache and imperial, and his face was lately shaven, while he had the appearance of one who knew that he was a handsome fellow and yet was willing to add to his looks all in his power by his picturesque costume and neatness of attire.

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen, I am glad to find that I did not have a fight upon my hands, as I feared when I struck your trail," said the horseman, in a pleasant way as he drew rein.

"No, indeed, sir, we are as peaceable as lambs, and are glad to meet you, for you doubtless live on this frontier?"

"I am chief of scouts, sir, at Fort Beauvoir, and my comrades call me Buffalo Bill, though I lay claim to the name of William Cody."

"Buffalo Bill?"

The name came from the lips of each of the Mexicans, and they gazed with interest, almost akin to awe upon the handsome scout.

"How often have I heard the name of Buffalo Bill, and listened to the stories told of your daring deeds."

"I am glad indeed to meet you, Buffalo Bill, and wish to present myself as Noel Norcross, a Texan rancher, while my companion is Captain Leon Luiz, of the Mexican Army."

Buffalo Bill frankly held out his hand in greeting, and then said:

"I will be glad to guide you to Fort Beauvoir, gentlemen, for I suppose that is your destination."

"Thank you, but no, we are looking for a place by the name of Ranch Isle, the home of Mrs. Bond and her daughter, who are old friends of ours."

"Indeed, then you are going wrong, and I am glad that I met you, for I can take you to Ranch Isle, as my way leads not far away from it."

"You are very kind, sir; but have you seen Mrs. Bond or her daughter of late?"

"Miss Bessie was over at the fort only two days ago, sir, and she was well."

"You, Captain Luiz, will doubtless find a gentleman at the fort whom you know, Don Eduardo Vincente, a Mexican ranchero."

"I do not recall the name, senor, but I shall be most happy to meet him," was the reply.

As the two travelers did not wish to reach Ranch Isle in the night, and the scout felt that he must go on his way to the fort, it was decided that Buffalo Bill should take supper with the two, and give them directions of how to reach the place the next morning.

So the three had supper together, and both the Mexicans were pleased with their guest, finding him a very different man from what they had expected him to be, as he was, also, different in appearance from what they had expected.

Having given them the directions of just how to find the trail, and declining to remain all night, as he was due at the fort, Buffalo Bill mounted his horse and went on his way.

"A remarkable man that scout, Leon," said Noel Norcross.

"Very, and a dangerous one too, to have as a foe."

"So I should judge, while he is just the man to tie to as a friend in need."

"True; but I judge he has been spoilt by his good looks, and a few daring deeds, for he spoke as though he was on most friendly terms with the officers."

"He doubtless is, for he is a different style of man from the average scout, I should judge; while in our service, or rather now I should say the Mexican service, that once was ours, such a man as a scout was impossible."

"I hope to meet him again; but come, it is growing late, so let us turn in for the night," and with Guard, the faithful dog to do sentinel duty, the two men spread their serapes and were soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE inmates of Ranch Isle had become thoroughly domiciled in the time they had been in their new home.

Half-Breed Harry was the chief of cowboys, and he had under him half a dozen men who were certainly not possessed of faces to give one confidence in their character.

The cattle, ponies, sheep and other animals on the place were progressing finely and the land of the ranch was ample to feed ten times the number then on it.

The cabin was most comfortable, and the negro man and his wife kept affairs going smoothly along at the home.

Mrs. Bond took great delight in caring for the fowls and looking after her dairy, while Bessie was general overseer on the ranch and her word was law.

She took a look at the cattle every day, also at the horses and gave her orders in a way that caused them to be obeyed.

Half-Breed Harry was as docile under her look as a lamb, and yet he was greatly feared by his men.

The stockade wall was high and strong enough to keep back a regiment, and the gate, lowered and raised by a windlass, could not have been battered down with less than a cannon.

The stockade ran from bank to bank, and the high steep sides, the foaming, rushing current all around the ranch, rendered approach impossible, while, as the cowboys did not have to guard the cattle, they had their camp in the little cabin on the neck of land.

Bessie had planted flowers in abundance, and the negro servant had gotten a garden for vegetables in fine condition, so that the mother and daughter lived on the very best.

Supplies were obtained from the stores at the post, and both Mrs. Bond and Bessie had begun to love their wild life on the plains, though they had not yet become really sociable with the officers and their families at the fort.

Bessie had got started upon a ride, as was her wont, after breakfast, when, soon after passing out of the stockade gate she saw two horsemen come into view.

They had a led horse and a huge dog, and the direction they were coming indicated that Ranch Isle was their destination.

"Oh, if it is only my brother, for how much he appears to be," cried Bessie as she beheld the horsemen when they were within a few hundred yards.

Then, as though determined to settle in her own mind the hope and doubt that filled it, Bessie rode rapidly on toward the two men.

She had no fear, for she was armed, and she was not one to know any dread of any one.

As she drew nearer she suddenly came to a halt.

"My God! one is Captain Leon Alvarez," she cried.

But the two had seen her and the conspirator captain had recognized her.

"Go on ahead alone, Noel," said Leon Luiz, dropping back with the pack-horse.

Noel Norcross did so. It was with feelings that nearly overwhelmed him that he drew near the maiden he so madly loved.

Nearly two years had gone by since he parted with her at her own home in Texas, and then they had talked of the love they felt for each other, and a day had been set for their marriage.

Two days after he had been arrested as a conspirator, thrown into prison and weeks after the trial, conviction and sentence had followed.

Then came his miraculous escape from death, his banishment from her, his wanderings, meeting with the Texan Noel Norcross, and his death.

Now, he was face to face with the maiden, who, though loving him, had driven him away from her, had exiled him forever from her presence.

And Bessie Bond?

How strange were her feelings at thus meeting once more the man she loved.

She saw that he had broken his exile from her and was coming to seek her again.

A feeling of joy was in her heart at the thought that he yet was true, still loved her.

Then came the recollection that she was the wife of Edward Vincent, posing at the fort under false colors.

"Oh, why has he come?" she said to herself, and then as she came nearer to him she cried in a voice choking with emotion:

"Leon Alvarez, why have you dared cross my path in life again, after I banished you from me forever?"

He raised his sombrero and bent low in his saddle.

Then he placed his horse by the side of hers and said in a low, earnest tone:

"Miss Norcross, hear what I have to say to you ere you condemn me."

"Come, ride along with me, for I have something to tell you."

"I am not Miss Norcross, for here I am known only as Bessie Bond."

"We have dropped the name of Norcross forever."

"I beg pardon, for I remember now that I was told so."

"And by whom?"

"The one to whom your brother was to go for information regarding your whereabouts."

"My brother?"

"Yes, Noel."

"Ah! poor Noel."

"But do you know aught of him?"

She had spoken quickly, almost excitedly, at the mention of the name of her brother, and her eyes were fixed upon the face of the Mexican with a look of pleading for him to answer her question quickly.

"Yes, I know of your brother, Bessie."

"I have hoped for his coming, but now that I see you, something tells me that he will never come back to us."

"Your presentiment is right, Bessie, for I have come to be your brother in Noel's place, for he is dead," was the low reply of the Mexican.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STORY TOLD.

THEN as the two rode along, the story of the Mexican was told to Bessie Bond.

He talked well and earnestly, and he began from his wanderings when he was set free by Edward Vincent, the night he had received her note exiling him from her presence forever.

"I owe you my life, senorita, for you it was that instigated the act of Edward Vincent. I know, though, he acted nobly in his devotion to you to carry out your plot and free me.

"I can never forget him for it, and the deep gratitude I owe to him."

The maiden started, and said quickly:

"You have never seen him since?"

"Never."

"You do not know where he is now?"

"I do not."

"Then you do not know that he, too, got into trouble in Texas, and was forced to leave the State?"

"No, senorita, I never knew of it.

"I am sorry for his misfortunes."

"Do you wish to know where he now is?"

"Yes, senorita."

"Here."

"Here?"

"Do you mean at your home?" quickly asked the Mexican.

"Oh, no; he is at Fort Beauvoir, and as mother and I, and you are, he is under an assumed name."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; he is known at the fort as a Mexican ranchero of great wealth, and he is under the name of Don Eduardo Vincente."

"Ah! the name that the scout, Buffalo Bill, spoke to us of, asking Leon if he knew him."

"Yes."

"And you see him often, senorita?"

"Oh, no; we met him on our way to Ranch Isle, and thus learned that he, too, was a fugitive, and at Fort Beauvoir."

"We are quite a settlement of fugitives, are we not?"

"It would seem so."

"But I have seen Don Eduardo only a few times, for we receive no visitors at Ranch Isle, and only now and then accept hospitalities at the fort."

"Then I will not go on with you, senorita."

"Oh, yes, for you are an exception, as is also your cousin."

"How strange that I am to call him Captain Leon Luiz, your name, while you are to be—my brother."

"Yes, I like this, for you resemble Noel, and it is a name you will like, I am sure."

"Yet I feel a hesitancy in going to the home where guests are not received."

"No, no; do not feel that way, for you are more than welcome."

"You forget that you are my brother."

"Then, too, Noel— Ah, mel how strange it seems to call one by the name, when he is not really Noel."

"But, then, I will soon drift into it, and if we have lost that dear, noble Noel we loved so, we can learn to love one who is to take his place."

"But let me tell you what I intended, Noel, and that is, that both mother and I had decided to come out of our shell, so to speak, and return some of the hospitalities showered upon us, by having our friends at the fort come over to spend a day with us, enjoy a wild-horse hunt, shooting-matches and other sports, for there are two English officers visiting there now, and I know Colonel Loyal would esteem it a great favor if we would invite them over."

"So I am glad you and Captain Luiz have come, for we will have a tournament, and you, Captain Luiz and Don Eduardo will match a party of their crack lasso-throwers, riders and shots, and see if we cannot win the prize from them."

"You know you are to be known as an old Texan friend, and Captain Luiz as one we have met before."

"That we have to mourn the death of my poor brother no one must know, for we are to still remain unknown here, all of us."

"Now, after my rudeness in keeping your cousin so long back in the rear, let me ask you to bring him up, and he shall have a sincere and warm welcome."

Leon Luiz was then called to come on, by Noel Norcross, and he was indeed most kindly greeted by Bessie Bond, who said in her honest way:

"In the bygone I often heard you spoken of, senior, by your cousin, as one who bore the same name as himself, and was a kinsman, while I also heard of you as a dashing officer in the Mexican service."

"For your cousin you were made to suffer, and then you were the companion in sorrow and misery of my own brother, Noel, and held his hand when his life slipped away."

"I have adopted Noel here most cheerfully as my brother, and I know that you and I will be the best of friends."

"Will we not?" and the hand of the maiden was held out to the Mexican, who answered earnestly:

"Indeed will we be, Senorita Bond."

"I have heard all from Noel, and must beg your pardon for my delaying so long in meeting you; but then he had so much to tell me."

"Come, you have both had but half your wel-

come now so let us hasten on to Ranch Isle, where mother will be most happy to receive you as dear friends, and honored guests."

As she spoke she wheeled her horse, and set the pace, and half an hour after the two Mexicans were surprised to find that Ranch Isle was really a delightful house in a wilderness, and the greeting which Mrs. Bond extended to them repaid them for the long trail they had followed to reach there.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RENDEZVOUS.

SKELETON GAP was a place to be dreaded, or at least by those who were influenced by superstition at all.

It had been the scene of an Indian battle in the past, between two tribes, and legends were handed down of how the whole canyon had run with the blood of the dead and dying.

Then a cavalry command, long years after, had battled there for life, and many a brave soldier had bit the dust in that wild canyon.

A spring of icy water trickled through it, and the timber grew thick there, while the grass was long and juicy. This fact had tempted a wagon train of emigrants to camp there on their way westward, to rest over Sunday.

And there had they left their bones to bleach under the sunshine and rain, for a band of Indians had hemmed them in in the canyon, and a frightful massacre had followed.

Long after, the bones had been gathered up and placed, by soldiers, under a pile of rocks erected in the form of a cross, and thus Skeleton Gap had its monument beyond its memory of the red past.

The Indians dreaded the spot, old hunters and scouts claimed that it was "haunted," and soldiers gave it a wide berth when they were on the march.

Very few men dared go through it, and yet, on the trail from Ranch Isle to Fort Beauvoir it would cut off miles to cut through the ridge by way of the Gap, rather than follow the road around the ridge.

Into Skeleton Gap, this weird place of fatal history, there rode one afternoon a horsewoman. She was splendidly mounted, rode like one born in the saddle, and her well-fitting habit displayed a perfect form.

She was alone, yet rode into Skeleton Gap as though its memories held no terror for her.

She passed on to the monument of rocks, dismounted, and wandering to the spring took a draught of the cool water from a buffalo-horn cup which some one had carved most skillfully and left there for general use.

It is needless to say that seldom was it used.

As though recalling the scenes that had occurred in Skeleton Gap the horsewoman stood gazing at the monument, the canyon and her surroundings.

Suddenly her horse pricked up his ears, and listening, as she saw his movement, she said:

"Your ears are good, Trailer."

"Yes, I hear hoof-falls now, so he is coming."

Soon after the faint thud of hoofs fell on her ear, and growing louder and louder, after some minutes a horseman dashed into view, coming along at a gallop.

His horse showed that he had ridden rapidly.

He saw the horsewoman, glanced about as though to see if she was alone, and then lightly touching his sombrero threw himself from his saddle.

"Well, Bessie, you have pluck to appoint this ghastly place as a rendezvous," said the man, as he advanced to meet her.

"Do not call me Bessie, for I do not wish you to make any mistake before others."

"As you please, Senorita Bond."

"I do so please."

"But now to my wishing you to meet me here."

"To tell me that you have repented to keep me aloof?"

"Oh, no."

"I shall never repent of doing what I deem right, and justice to myself."

"Why have I been sent for to come here, then?"

"I wish to tell you that mother and I intend to be a little more sociable, especially as we have guests visiting us now."

"Guests?"

"Yes."

"And you intend to be sociable?"

"Yes, for we have held too much aloof."

"So I have thought, and those at the fort do not understand it."

"Well, I shall have an entertainment at Ranch Isle and invite all our friends at the fort."

"But first I wish you to call upon our guests."

"One of them you already know, and the other you are to call upon as he is a brother Mexican, you know."

"A brother Mexican?"

"Oh, yes, for you are Don Eduardo Vincente, the Mexican ranchero, you know—"

"Yes, I had forgotten."

"It is dangerous to forget."

"You should never forget who you are."

"True."

"But who is this Mexican?"

"You are not afraid of your Spanish, are you?"

"Oh, no."

"You need not be, for your Spanish is perfect, while I like that accent you have in speaking English."

"Who is the Mexican?"

"One who was a lieutenant of artillery in the Mexican Army, and of course knows your secret, for I told him, that you are not a Mexican, only pretending."

"You told him this?"

"Oh, yes, but then as he is a fugitive from justice it makes no difference, as he will keep your secret."

"Who is he, I asked?"

"He is going under his own name, or rather two-thirds of it, for he has dropped the last name for reasons you can understand when I tell you that he was arrested in that conspiracy plot and thrown into prison, but managed to make his escape, and so prefers this country now to his native land."

"Again I ask you who he is?"

"He is now known as Captain Leon Luiz, but was once Lieutenant Leon Luiz Alvarez."

"My God!" and the man started and turned livid as the name fell from the lips of the beautiful Texan.

CHAPTER XXV.

HER POWER.

"You seem greatly disturbed at knowing that Lieutenant Alvarez is here," said Bessie Bond, with her eyes riveted upon the face of the man before her, and whose start and pallor she had at once noticed.

"I thought that he had died in prison, for I certainly heard so," announced Don Eduardo, quickly regaining his calmness, while he added:

"It was the surprise at learning that one I believed dead was alive."

"No, he is alive and well, though doubtless the Mexicans intended that he should die in prison."

"Doubtless."

"He was accused of conspiracy, as was his cousin, Captain Alvarez, and was meant to suffer death, though not by execution."

"But was pardoned?"

"On the contrary, he escaped."

"Escaped?"

"Oh, yes, he got away, and in safety."

"I am glad of that."

"So am I."

"But strangest of all, do you know that an American was also lured into Mexico, charged with being in this same conspiracy, and he, too, was thrown into prison."

"He had but to appeal to his Government, and show his innocence, to be released."

"True, if he could get any one to forward his appeal, or to prove his innocence."

"Could he not?"

"In a Mexican prison, oh, no!"

"Is he still there?"

"No, he escaped."

"Who was he?"

"He was imprisoned with Lieutenant Alvarez, and they planned an escape, and as both had some money with them, were able to bribe their guards, and thus carry out their plot."

"They got away, but were like vagabonds, for they had nothing left, were poor, friendless, and fugitives."

"They drifted to the mines of New Mexico and got work."

"Saving their money, they bought what is called a miner's outfit, and went prospecting for gold."

"At last they struck a lead and made it pay, digging out quite a sum after a year or more."

"Well?"

"When at last one of them, the American, felt that he was able to return to his home in Texas they decided to go together, as their lead was about worked out."

"Lieutenant Alvarez went to the settlement to purchase horses and an outfit, and his friend—"

"Who had been his fellow-prisoner?"

"Yes."

"Who was he?"

"You shall know in good time."

"I am curious."

"Doubtless, most men of your lawless life are."

"I wish not to be insulted."

"Well, to my story."

"This friend remained at their cabin, and was shot from an ambush by an assassin."

"Ah!"

"Yes, and strange to say the assassin was none other than your former chief of cowboys, Garcia."

"Indeed! I heard he had gone to the bad."

"Like master, like man."

"I beg you to be careful in your comments, Senorita Bond."

"Well, this man had hardly fired the shot before he in turn was killed by a stranger who had happened upon the little cabin and stood gazing upon it."

"It served him right."

"So I think.

"The miner, however, was fatally wounded and died that night, his fellow miner having returned, and with the stranger being with him.

"Do you know he recognized this stranger as an old friend, and thought so much of him that he urged him to take his name, and to seek his family and tell them all.

"The stranger accepted the legacy of the name, and the charge put upon him, and so pledged himself, and he it is who has accompanied Captain Leon Luiz, as the ex-officer of the Mexican Army is called, to Ranch Isle."

"Then the two are there now?"

"Yes."

"And this miner who was killed?"

"Was my brother Noel."

"Ha! can this be possible?"

"It is just as possible as it is that he was avenged by the one who took his name and came to us with the news of his death, and the gold he had saved up."

"And who is this stranger?"

"You will be surprised to know that it is the man you so ably befriended once."

"That I befriended?"

"Yes."

"I do not know to whom you refer."

"Well, now he is known as Noel Norcross, but you knew him as the conspirator captain, Leon Alvarez."

A cry burst from the lips of Don Eduardo at this, and he said savagely:

"See here, girl! You are my wife, and you are driving me too far to admit that man to your home."

"Oh, no; for it is my brother's home, and he is there as my brother, you know."

"And he knows that you are my wife?"

"Oh, no; and I do not intend that he or his cousin shall know."

"He speaks of you with kindness and the deepest gratitude, and I told them that you had been forced to leave Texas, and were living at the fort as Don Eduardo Vincente, that you, as we and they were, was a fugitive."

"I told them that you would come over to see them, that we would have a grand tournament at Ranch Isle, and afterward mother and I would slip away quietly with you and go with them to visit my brother's cabin home and grave in New Mexico."

"Then they were to go their way, while you would escort us back. For that you could give us a guard of men, as we might need protection."

"Now, will you act as I demand in this matter, or as your ugly humor prompts you to do?"

After a struggle with himself, he said bitterly:

"Yours is the power to force me to obey your wishes."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A MYSTERIOUS GOING AND COMING.

"You are wise, for as I hold the whip-band, I will use the lash if I have to," said Bessie Bond.

"Do not threaten."

"But I do, for it is bad enough to have married you, a criminal at the time, and become deceived in you, for I did believe you an honorable man."

"Then to come here and find you the secret leader of The Deserters, while you are living a double life at the fort—I say it is bad enough to know this, and suffer, without having you do one act that will be different from the course my mother and myself have determined to pursue."

"These two gentlemen will remain for awhile, as I said, at Ranch Isle, as our guests, and then will guide us to the grave of my brother, for it was his dying request that we should go there, and see his home, his place of work, the spot where he had died by the hand of an assassin, and, by a strange coincidence, an assassin who was your servant once, for he was nothing more."

"You surely do not connect me with the murder of your brother?" said the man, indignantly.

"Well, no, though you are none too good for any act of crime."

"I only referred to it as a coincidence, and so spoke of your man Garcia being the murderer."

"I see."

"I am glad."

"But, let me add that having seen my brother's grave we will come back to our home here, while the two Mexicans go their way, thus parting forever from us."

"Do you mean this?"

"Of course I do, for am I not your wife?"

"And some day you will allow me to claim you as such?"

"Never!"

"What?"

"I swear it, for you have no claim upon me; I have no hold upon you save my power over you, knowing, as I do, that you are the Deserter Captain."

"But come, this interview has lasted too long, so let me tell you that it is my wish that you come to Ranch Isle this afternoon to visit our guests."

"Then I will send a message to you at the fort, asking you to invite Colonel Loyal to get up a party, and come to our home for a day of sport."

"Now, Don Eduardo, farewell."

She stepped quickly toward her horse, leaped to the saddle unaided, and was gone without another word, while Don Eduardo mounted his horse and dashed back toward the fort, his brain in a whirl after his interview with this strange woman who so firmly held him in her control.

The visit of the Don was made, and as neither Mrs. Bond or Bessie hinted at the secret of the pretended Don's lawless life, the two guests had no suspicion of it, neither knowing the circumstances under which he had left Texas.

So they had a pleasant talk with the Don, and then the note was written by Bessie asking Colonel Loyal to make up a party to spend the day at Ranch Isle, and challenging a party from the fort to meet the guests of the ranch, with herself and Don Eduardo in a contest as wild-horse catchers.

The lasso tournament came off at Ranch Isle, in grand style, and Mrs. Bond and Bessie proved themselves most delightful hostesses.

The quartette from the fort, Mustang Madge, Surgeon Powell, Lieutenant Onderdonk and Buffalo Bill were the victors over Bessie Bond, Noel Norcross, Captain Luiz and Don Eduardo Vincente.

With his blonde hair, inherited from his American mother and which made him look the more like a Texan than a Mexican, Noel Norcross as the king of the rope, won the admiration of every one, and their respect as well, while his cousin, Luiz, was petulant in manners, arrogant and by no means popular with the fort contingent.

That Bessie Bond felt hurt at the victory of those from the fort there was no doubt; but she hid her feelings well, and could not but rebuke the Mexican captain for his very pronounced ill-humor.

The next night the three Mexicans visited the settlement, and the Devil's Acre, presided over by Emerald Ed, and the Faro Fairy.

While there an attempt was made to kill Captain Luiz, which was frustrated by Buffalo Bill, the intended murderer claiming that he recognized in the Mexican one who was an outlaw.

Whatever secret the man could have told was prevented by the quick shot of the Mexican, while Buffalo Bill had his grip upon him, which forever silenced his tongue.

Soon after the lasso tournament of Ranch Isle the startling rumor went around the fort that the dwellers in that model frontier home had left it forever.

It was said that Emerald Ed had purchased Ranch Isle, and that Bessie Bond had gone to Mexico to wed Captain Leon Luiz, while Don Eduardo Vincente had gone along to act as his best man.

These mysterious rumors set all at the fort commenting upon the mysterious mother and daughter at Ranch Isle, and ere the excitement of their going had died away, suddenly Don Eduardo Vincente returned to his home at the fort, and then came the information that Mrs. Bond and Bessie had also returned to their home, but that the Mexican and Texan were not with them.

CHAPTER XXVII.

RIVALS.

It may be that Don Eduardo had other reasons for wishing to have Bessie Bond acknowledge her marriage to him than the fact that she was a very beautiful and lovable maiden.

Certain it was, however, that he did not wish to lose his hold upon her, and though he was governed by her strong will openly, he yet secretly plotted to have affairs go to his liking.

He was certainly jealous of the pretended Texan, Noel Norcross, and hated him with intensest venom.

Then there was another rival in the field for Bessie's love.

This was Leon Luiz.

He had loved her at sight, and though he knew of his cousin's regard for her, for he had been told the whole story by Noel Norcross, it made no difference to him.

His was a different nature from the blonde-haired Mexican, who was all nobility of soul.

Leon Luiz however knew nothing of Bessie's being bound to Don Eduardo, nor did Noel Norcross, for that matter.

But with the former he felt that it was a game to win the maiden if he could, no matter who else might suffer by it.

He had not been twenty-four hours at the Ranch before he was madly in love with Bessie, and insanely jealousy of her as well.

He mistook her kind manner toward him for a return of his affection, and then put on an imperious manner at once, as though he was master there.

He saw that his cousin idolized her, and supposed that Don Eduardo also did; but all were to be sacrificed for his love, for he had determined that it should be so.

A handsome fellow, he had always won favor in the eyes of women, and he felt sure that

if Bessie had been engaged to his cousin, and afterward regarded the Don with affection, he could win her away from both of them.

The Don saw his mad infatuation and seemed to read just what he intended to try to do.

Noel Norcross, of a different notion, did not see any act of his cousin in its right light, for he held no suspicion against him.

But he did note a marked coolness of his cousin for himself, and could not account for it, other than that he had been the victor in the last tournament among the Ranch Isle party.

The affair occurring on their visit to Emerald Ed's had made both of the Mexicans most cautious.

"I am sure, Leon, that the fellow was a spy of the Mexican Government, and your quick shot alone kept him from betraying us."

"There may be more of them about, so it will be well to hasten our departure," Noel Norcross had said.

"Yes, we will guide Mrs. Bond and the senorita to the grave of my miner friend in our cabin home."

"Then we can go on our way once more," answered Leon Luiz, and it was well for the other that he did not see the treacherous look in the eyes of his cousin.

Don Eduardo had promised to accompany the party a short distance on their way, and then he said he had certain business that would keep him away from the fort for some time.

He had promised to give the party an escort of five men, as the cowboys at the ranch could not well be spared.

Where he got these men was not asked him, save by Bessie, who said to him when the others did not hear:

"Are these men from your outlaw band of Deserters?"

"No, I secured them in the settlement."

"I am glad of that, for I have more confidence in them, and you know that we return without the protection of Noel and Senor Leon."

"You will find these men all right," was the reply.

The next day the Don quietly left the fort, and going to Ranch Isle, the party set off from there to go to the cabin of the murdered Texan and his grave.

Before going the Don had spread a rumor to suit himself, regarding the departure of the mother and daughter, giving it out that Bessie had long been engaged to Captain Leon Luiz, and was going to Mexico to become his wife, while he was to act as "best man," and then return to the fort.

He also stated that Ranch Isle was to be sold to Emerald Ed, and in fact let rumors go afloat as though he held no thought that Bessie Bond and her mother were to return to Ranch Isle.

The motive for these rumors will be developed later, when the counterplot of the Don was known.

The five men selected as an escort by the Don were a hardy-looking lot; bold riders, daring plainsmen, and skillful trailers, they appeared.

They were all splendidly mounted and armed, and had several led horses along for fear of accidents.

Mrs. Bond and Bessie both went upon horseback, and were accompanied by their negro servants.

They had half a dozen pack-horses along, all loaded with camp equipage for their comfort on the way, and they felt that the long trip would not after all be such a severe one, prepared as they were for it.

Captain Leon Luiz, in his arrogant claim upon Bessie, asserted the right to be leader, and Noel Norcross calmly yielded to him, for after their first night's camp on the trail, the Don bade them farewell, told the ladies he hoped to see them back at Ranch Isle before long, and then set out alone upon some trail of his own.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE "CAPTAIN" AND "THE SERGEANT."

It was known that Don Eduardo Vincente was a good guide, and he had volunteered to give instructions to the man who was to be the leader of the men who were to escort Mrs. Bond and Bessie to New Mexico and back again.

Of course they were to yield to the two Mexicans, while they were along with the party, but then upon the five men devolved the duty of getting the ladies back to Ranch Isle.

So when on the march during the morning, when Don Eduardo was along, after a talk with Mrs. Bond he rode ahead and joined the guide, who was known as the "Sergeant," he having been in the army, it was said.

The sergeant was a large man, athletic in build and looked like one to be depended on in a close place.

"Well, sergeant, I have come ahead to have a talk with you, for I do not go further than the first night's camp, you know."

"Yes, captain, so they told us."

"You are to be the real leader of the party."

"I understand, sir."

"Of course yield to that mad young Mexican Luiz, when you can, but with Norcross there

will doubtless be no trouble, as he is not one to push himself forward."

"No, sir, he is a different man from Captain Luiz, I can see, and more of a man, too."

"Yes, but you must not anger the other, or do anything to cause suspicion."

"No, sir."

"You are to guide them to this cabin in the mines of New Mexico."

"I understand, sir, and I worked there, you know."

"They will remain there a week perhaps, to rest, and then the two Mexicans will leave them."

"Yes, sir."

"You will have had ample time to arrange your plans, with Mexicans you will find in the mines, so as to have a seeming attack made upon you, and the capture of the entire party."

"Yes, sir."

"You will send your men back, but you, as a pretended prisoner, will be taken on to Mexico with the others, and pretending to be a Mexican Government officer, you will go to the Commandante Garza."

"To him give this letter from me, and he will take charge of your prisoners."

"Yes, captain."

"Then you are to return here to me with the note the Commandante Garza will give you for me."

"Yes, Senior Captain."

"Now I hope you understand your orders, sergeant?"

"Yes, captain."

"I am to guide the party to the mine in New Mexico, where they are to remain a week."

"I am to find then the one whom you bid me seek, a Mexican, who with others of his countrymen, are to capture the two ladies and the officers."

"Yes."

"I am to have my men pretend to be slain, while I am supposed to be taken prisoner, and by night marches we are to cross into Mexico, when I am to deliver my letter to Commandante Garza."

"The prisoners are to be left with him, and I, receiving a letter from the Commandante Garza for you, am to return to you."

"That is it exactly, sergeant, and I feel that I can trust you."

"Of course the commandante will pay the men you ask to serve you, a price for their work, and I will see that the four of our band with you do not suffer when they return."

"As for you, sergeant, why I will share with you the rewards that are to come to me for this transaction."

"You are very kind, Senior Captain."

"I wish to be just, sergeant."

"But while you are away I will go on the trails with The Deserters and endeavor to reap a harvest of gold, for I think I know a plan by which, through the capture of those Englishmen at the fort, I can secure a very large ransom."

"It would be a good haul, captain."

"Yes, and having done that, bid them freely of their gold, I have another game to play that will enrich me, and that means you, sergeant."

"I thank you, sir."

"I hold a secret that they would give a small fortune to know."

"The truth is, sergeant, I know just where to lay my hands upon the lost heir, whom they have come from England to find."

"That should bring big money, captain."

"It will; but first they must be captured, and held for ransom, and they are both rich and able to pay largely."

"This done, I can sell them my secret for a large sum, and when they get my secret they will have me to buy off, for I am plotting to get a fortune at a single haul, sergeant, and you are to be my ally."

"Command me, captain, for I am ready to serve you, as much on account of my regard for you as to further my own interests."

"I believe that of you, sergeant, and you will get rich by serving me, I promise you."

"Now we understand each other."

"Perfectly, captain."

With this the Deserter Captain, after a few more words, left the guide and awaited the coming along of the others.

"I have given the guide full instructions, Senior Bessie," he said.

And it was the next morning that he bade farewell to the party whom he was sending into a trap.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SERGEANT'S RETURN.

AMONG those most interested at the fort, with the people at Ranch Isle, and the connection of Don Eduardo Vincente with them, was Buffalo Bill the chief of scouts.

He had begun to grow very suspicious of Don Eduardo, and he held the same feeling in regard to Bessie Bond and all at Ranch Isle.

He had known that Bessie Bond and Don Eduardo had secretly met each other, when before people they seemed almost as strangers.

Mustang Madge, the Daughter of the Fifth, in her rides alone around the fort, for the dar-

ing girl went everywhere without fear, had told Buffalo Bill that she too had known Bessie Bond to meet Don Eduardo in Skeleton Gap.

Surgeon Frank Powell was also suspicious, and so it was that an eye was to be kept upon the Don and the people of Ranch Isle.

But then suddenly came the departure of Bessie Bond and her mother with the two guests who had been visiting them, and Don Eduardo also went along.

This stopped the detective work which Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Mustang Madge intended to keep upon them, for if Bessie Bond had gone to Mexico to marry Captain Leon Luiz, as the Don had reported, they would hardly return to Ranch Isle.

So they decided to await the return of the Don, for as he left his quarters undisturbed, and his man-of-all-work, Amigo, there, it was proof of his coming back.

Time passed away and there came rumors of the robberies of coaches and trains by The Deserters.

The English officers had come to the conclusion that the heir they had sought so diligently and untiringly was dead, and had departed from the fort to return to England.

But then came news from an old hunter, Trapper Dennis, that the heir and other whites were captives in the mountain village of the Sioux, and so Colonel Loyal recalled Lord Lonsfield and Sir John, who had already reached New York.

Back they came with all dispatch, and it was upon their return from the last stage station to the fort that they had been held up by The Deserters, and when about to yield themselves prisoners, they had been rescued by Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and old Trapper Dennis, who had put the outlaws to flight, as they believed a company of cavalry had come to the rescue.

Several days after this attack Don Eduardo arrived at the fort, having just returned, he said, from Mexico.

Then came the startling rumor that Mrs. Bond and Bessie had also returned to Ranch Isle.

"I say startling rumor, for it surprised many, after what they had heard, and it certainly startled Don Eduardo Vincente."

The two English noblemen had started with Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and a company of cavalry, under Captain Taylor, to the rescue of the white captives, among whom it was expected that the lost heir, Granger Goldhurst, would be found, as Trapper Dennis had reported, and the old hunter also went along with the rescuers.

The Don's return was just after their departure, and he had barely got back when news came into the fort, by a scout, that M. s. Bond and her daughter were home again.

Whatever anxiety the Don had felt to be welcomed back by his friends at the fort, no sooner did this report reach him than he mounted a fresh horse and rode rapidly away.

His trail was in the direction of Ranch Isle but he branched off just before nightfall, and took the way that would lead him through Skeleton Gap.

He did not appear to dread the spot as others did, for in the twilight he went boldly into the canyon, and held on until he came to a break in the wall of rock, and which was hidden from any one passing through the Gap by a thicket.

It was dark now, and he gave a low whistle.

It was answered, and he rode on through the crevice, which was winding and overgrown with stunted trees.

Suddenly before him came a glimmer of light, and a moment after he came to the head of the false canyon.

There grew a grove of pines, and in their midst was a spring.

Near this was a camp-fire, and a man stood there, while a fryingpan, with some bacon in it, was upon the fire, a venison steak was broiling upon the coals, some potatoes were in the ashes, and a coffee-pot had just been set one side.

Back among the pines a horse was feeding, and there was an india-rubber blanket spread as a shelter, while beneath it was a bed of blankets, with a hunter's outfit close at hand.

The man showed no anxiety at the approach of his visitor, for he seemed to know just who it was, and as the Don dismounted in the arc of the firelight, called out:

"I was expecting you, captain."

"I hope you are well, sir, and you are just in time for supper."

"Well, sergeant, I am more interested in hearing your report than I am in supper."

"When did you get back?"

"Yesterday, sir, and came right here as you told me to do, to camp and await your return."

"Your men did not come back as ordered?"

"No, sir."

"But the ladies did."

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant, I am here to know just what this means," said the Don sternly.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHAT IT MEANT.

THE sergeant saw that the Don was on the war-path, so to speak.

He could see that he was very angry.

But he coolly put the fryingpan of bacon aside, and took the venison steak from the coals, while he said:

"Will you eat supper first, captain?"

"No, I wish no supper."

"Tell me what your bringing those women back means."

"Will you come over and sit down upon my blankets, sir?"

"No, sit there, and I will sit here."

The sergeant's face grew a trifle anxious, and he cast a wistful look over toward his blankets, a dozen feet away, where lay his belt of arms.

He, however, sat down upon the rock indicated and the Don took his position opposite to him.

"Now, sergeant, when we parted you were to send your four men back to me, and you were to go on to Mexico and bring me tidings from Commandante Garza that you had done your duty as I directed."

"Yes, captain."

"Well, your four men have not come back, and instead of returning alone here you put in an appearance ahead of time and you bring back with you Mrs. Bond and her daughter."

"How did you learn of their coming, sir?"

"A scout saw them on their trail to the ranch."

"Yes, sir, and I left them to come here and meet you, for I felt sure you would soon look me up at this rendezvous when you heard of their return."

"I have done so, and now to your report."

"Yes, sir."

"What does it mean?"

The sergeant seemed either to wish to gain time, or to put off telling his story as long as possible.

But as he saw the manner of the Don growing more earnest, he said boldly:

"Well, captain, you shall have my story from beginning to end."

"You gave me orders which, if I had carried out, would have sent those two officers to their death, and the two ladies to imprisonment in Mexico for life."

"I know what I did, sir."

"Now, captain, I did not care much for Captain Leon Luiz, for he was too insolent and overbearing for any one to like him."

"But I did care for Mr. Noel Norcross, for he was a splendid fellow."

"What has this to do with your story?"

"Just this, sir:

"One of my men got hold of your letter while I was unconscious from a fall of my horse."

"He read it, and learned just what you wrote to Commandante Garza."

"He then told me about it, and said that he and his three comrades had determined to have a finger in the pie."

"We were at the miners' cabin then, and they had made up their minds to get no help from the Mexicans in the mines, for your letter told them who the two officers were, and that there was a reward of ten thousand pesos for one of them who had escaped from prison."

"For the other, supposed to be dead, they said the Government would pay treble the sum, for it would make known a secret of how the conspirator captain had not been executed, and who was to blame in the matter."

"So the four men, of our band of Deserters, sir, decided to take the two prisoners there themselves and get the reward."

"I begged, urged, and commanded, but it was of no use."

"I then tried to arrange for the escape of the two officers, but they had me covered with their weapons, and I could do nothing."

"That night I was securely bound and gagged."

"It was the intention of the men to, also, take the two ladies, as aids, your letter to the commandante said, of the rescue of Captain Alvarez from being executed, and of Lieutenant Alvarez from prison."

"These ladies, your letter said, were to be held as prisoners until you visited Mexico to get your reward for the return of the two officers."

"But, I begged for the ladies, and so at last the four men agreed to take the two officers only."

"The latter bade the ladies farewell, little dreaming what their fate was to be, and I was kept apart, for the men made out that my injury from the fall of my horse was greater than it was."

"The men said they would accompany the two officers to the mining-camp, and then return to go back with us, and so the ladies believed they would do."

"It was impossible for me to call out, with the gag in my mouth, or free myself, and so I passed the night until the morning, when, as the men had not returned, Miss Bessie came over to my quarters in search of me."

"She found me bound and gagged, and quickly released me."

"It was some time before I could speak, and when I did, I would not tell her the fate I knew that these two officers had gone away to meet, for I knew that she loved one of them with all her soul."

"Leon Luiz," was the low utterance of the Deserter Captain.

"No, indeed, sir, it was the noble fellow who goes by the name of Noel Norcross that she loves."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir, and I had not the heart to tell her their fate."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that the men, after seeing the two officers to the mines, intended to desert, to remain and dig gold, and they had bound and gagged me to prevent my resisting their going."

"With this, captain, I told the ladies that I could bring them back to their home."

"And you did so."

"I did, captain, for what else could I do?" and the sergeant looked anxious at the expression he saw upon the face of the Deserter Captain.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PUNISHMENT.

THE Deserter Captain had a strange look upon his face.

It was certainly one of suspicion of the man he had trusted.

He had listened in almost silence to the long story of the sergeant, drawing his own conclusions the while.

"And the two ladies do not suspect that your men took the two officers to Mexico?"

"They do not, sir."

"You thought it best that they should not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because you had discovered that Miss Bond loved the Mexican captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you make this discovery?"

"Well, sir, I am a good reader of human nature, and I saw that where Miss Bond despised Senor Luiz, yet treated him politely, she loved the captain and hid it from him all she could."

"Ah! she hid it from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he?"

"I never saw more than great courtesy upon his part toward her, though I am sure he loved her."

"You are?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Luiz?"

"Loved her, too, sir, but for some reason the lady appeared to fear him."

"To fear him?"

"Well, sir, it looked to me as though she was afraid he would do away with the captain, for he certainly acted toward him as though he did not like him."

"And your men took my letter, given you, to the Senor Garza?"

"No, sir, I have the letter, but they had it."

"They intended to simply take their prisoners to him on their own hook, not mentioning you, and they would get the rewards they demanded."

"A clever scheme."

"Yes, sir, for villainy, but one I was sorry to have carried out, though I did not care to see Senor Norcross or the ladies suffer."

"Well, do you know, sergeant, what my idea is?"

"No, sir."

"I trusted you, and you are the only man of the band of Deserters who has seen me unmasked."

"Yes, sir."

"You are the only one who has any idea as to who I am."

"I understand, sir."

"I trusted you in this matter because I wished to have an ally, and you should have benefited largely by serving me."

"I don't mind now telling you some secrets."

"You are kind, sir."

"So I consider, when you have deceived me."

"What could I do, sir, under the circumstances?"

"Well, I must tell you that I wanted the man you know as Noel Norcross out of the way because he was my rival in love."

"Ah, sir, you too love the Senorita Bessie?"

"Exactly, and have since I first met her."

"I love her for herself, and because I happen to know that she is heiress to a large fortune which she does not know of."

"Her father is a prisoner for life, and he holds a secret he will not divulge."

"By his death she becomes sole heiress, as her brother is dead, and I have an idea that her mother will not live long."

"She seems in perfect health, sir, and rode on the long trip like a young girl."

"Oh, yes, but sudden deaths often occur, you know."

"Oh captain, you—"

"Silence, and hear me."

"Yes, sir."

"I wanted the two Mexican officers out of the way, so I was the one who plotted against them as conspirators, while they were innocent, or rather the captain was, while the lieutenant was just enough implicated to convict his cousin."

"I wanted Miss Bessie's brother out of the way, so I sent him into Mexico to serve Captain

Alvarez, and had him arrested on suspicion and thrown into prison with Captain Alvarez."

"The two escaped, as you doubtless know."

"Now, let me tell you that Miss Bessie Bond is my wife."

"Your wife?" gasped the sergeant.

"Yes, she married me on the condition that I would save Captain Alvarez from execution."

"I told you that she loved him."

"She kept her contract but fled from me."

"I found her here, but she holds the power to hang me, so I can not make known our marriage, or bring her to terms."

"With her mother and herself in a Mexican prison I could have brought her to terms and would have gotten her fortune, which her father holds the secret of."

"Of course Alvarez and his cousin would be put to death and that would get them out of the way."

"While my wife was in Mexico imprisoned, I intended to lay my plans here for the kidnapping of the heir of Granger Goldhurst, whom those Englishmen are searching for."

"I failed in my attempt to capture them through the rescue of Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell."

"But with the heir in my power I have a fortune in my grasp."

"Once I get that I would go from here forever, take the trail for Mexico and bring Bessie Bond to terms."

"But you have destroyed all of my plans, have proven traitor, by bringing them back here, and I never forget a wrong or forgive one."

"Having betrayed me I do not need your services longer, and hence to prevent further betrayal of me I shall kill you."

And, as he spoke, the Deserter Captain raised his revolver quickly and pulled trigger.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AFTER THE SHOT IN THE GAP.

THE confession of his evil deeds to the sergeant seemed to cause him to feel more anxious for his life, rather than that it was renewed confidence for him on the part of the Deserter Captain.

He had when cooking his supper left his weapons lying upon the blanket bed.

He had tried to edge near the belt of arms but the captain seemed to divine his intention and so kept him as it were under the muzzle of his revolver.

When he saw what was coming the sergeant made an attempt to spring for his weapons, but the bullet struck him fairly in the head and he dropped back his length upon the ground.

Then the Deserter Captain calmly searched the body, took from it a belt of money, some papers and a watch and chain.

Having done this he mounted his horse and rode away.

As he turned from the false canyon into the real one of Skeleton Gap he did not even cast a look down toward the entrance in the direction of Ranch Isle.

Had he done so he would have seen a horse suddenly reined back into the shadows of the pines.

On up the canyon he went at a canter and was soon upon his way to Fort Beauvoir.

The Deserter Captain felt that he had at least avenged his being betrayed by the sergeant.

Furthermore he was sure that he had kept the sergeant from betraying any more secrets of his.

That the man had sent the four men with the two officers, to get the rewards, and brought Mrs. Bond and Bessie back with him for motives of his own, the Deserter Captain did not doubt.

He did not believe that the sergeant had betrayed his part in the affair to Mrs. Bond or her daughter; but he did feel that he had destroyed his plans by bringing them back to Ranch Isle, and thus having him do the whole work over again.

"The sergeant was in love with her himself," he muttered.

"Now I must be very cautious, for I am playing a very bold game, but the slightest mistake may miss all."

"I can trust Amigo, that is certain, but no one else, and even he does not know me as the Deserter Captain."

"Not another one of my band must ever see my face, and I was a fool to trust that sergeant."

"It would have been best to have sent Amigo, or even, as my attempt on the Englishmen failed, to have gone myself."

"If I do lose my rewards for the two Mexican officers, I must be content, for I can get through Bessie Bond and the Granger Goldhurst heir enough to far more than compensate for those losses."

"Now, I must return to the fort and lay my plans safely."

"To-morrow I will ride over to Ranch Isle and see the Bonds, telling them that I had just learned from the sergeant of their return, and that my four men were tempted to desert them when they reached the gold mines."

"I must calm any suspicion that Bessie may have that I wish to harm her, or intend double play."

"Now, what about that body and horse in the false canyon at Skeleton Gap?"

"Well, they must remain there, for they may never be found, and if they are, the sergeant's death will never be understood."

"There are but four persons I know of besides myself that dare go through Skeleton Gap."

"Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Frank Powell are off with those Englishmen in the mountains, and so they will be away for some time."

"Mustang Madge has been commanded by Colonel Loyal and her adopted father the chaplain, not to go a mile from the fort alone, and unless to keep a rendezvous with me Bessie Bond would not go there."

"Then I do not believe that any of the four suspect the presence of the false canyon hidden by that pine thicket, so the sergeant's body can remain there, and the horse starve, while the wolves will soon make short work of them."

"As for myself I do not care to go through Skeleton Gap again, for I have a strange dread of the place, I am constrained to admit."

"Ah! there come the lights of the fort into sight," and the Deserter Captain rode on more briskly.

He circled around the fort to the settlement and reached his own quarters, where Amigo met him.

"The Surgeon Scout has returned, senor," said Dandy Dan, whom Don Eduardo Vincente always addressed as Amigo.

"What! has he come back from the expedition into the mountain in search of the lost heir?"

"Yes, senor."

"Where is he?"

"In the fort, sir."

"He came a short while since."

"Alone?"

"Yes, sir, and asked where you were."

"Then he went on to the fort, and that is all I know."

"I do not like his returning."

"Was Buffalo Bill with him?"

"No, senor, he was alone."

"All right; I'll take a run into the fort and see what he has returned for."

"But I must dress up a little, as I shall drop into the officers' club," and the Don entered his cabin to arrange his toilet, while Amigo led his horse away to the stable near by, where the pretended Mexican always kept half a dozen fine animals for his especial use.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RESCUER.

THE one who drew back into the pines out of sight, when the Deserter Captain rode out of the false canyon, into Skeleton Gap, drew a long breath of relief when the outlaw rode on.

When the sound of hoof-falls had died away in the distance, the rider advanced to the pine thicket at the mouth of the false canyon, and gave a whistle.

No response came, and again the whistle was repeated.

Still there was no answer.

"I wonder if he can be away."

"That certainly was not the sergeant who rode out of the pines, for his was a white horse."

"I will go in and see if he is there."

"He told me to push boldly on through the pines, and I would come to a crevice in the rocks through which I could pass, and that the little canyon was beyond."

"That was surely the Don who visited him, and I was lucky not to have been seen here by him."

"But why has the sergeant gone away?"

So saying the speaker rode on, passed through the crevice, and came in sight of a glimmering light.

A moment more and the camp-fire was discovered, burning brightly.

On went the rider, and suddenly came upon the form of the sergeant, lying full length before the camp-fire.

The rider gave vent to a cry of horror, and no wonder, for it was a woman.

It was in fact a woman—Bessie Bond.

She was mounted upon a fine black horse, and carried her lariat at her saddle-horn.

She was dressed in a black habit and slouch hat, carried her revolver in a belt about her slender waist, and looked like one to use them.

The sight of the sergeant's form lying at full length near the fire caused her to dash forward, leap from her saddle, and approach him.

"Yes, he has been shot!"

"That was Edward Vincent, the Deserter Captain."

"Oh! but he shall repent this act."

She bent over the form as she spoke, and then uttered a cry of pleasure.

"He is not dead!"

She placed her hand upon the wound, and drawing off her glove, put her finger hard upon the place where the ball entered.

It was just to left of the forehead, and a quick examination showed her that the bullet had glanced.

Turning the head, she discovered where it had cut its way out.

"If the skull is not fractured, then the wound is not fatal.

"The bullet glanced and the shock stunned him.

"It has been hardly more than ten minutes since I heard the shot fired.

"I will try and revive him."

With this she seized one of the cooking utensils at the fire, ran to the spring and filled it, returned and began to bathe the face of the sergeant.

After awhile the eyes slowly opened, the hand was raised and passed slowly over the face, and the lips parted with the words:

"He fired full in my face.

"But I am not dead."

"No, sergeant, you are not dead, for his bullet, though well aimed, glanced on your skull."

"Oh, it is you, Miss Bessie," and the sergeant raised himself to a sitting position.

"Yes, I came to see you, as you had told me how to find you, to say that only Half-Breed Harry was at the ranch, and that from what he told us had happened since our going, that you had better not remain here, but go to your retreat and join your band.

"Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack have been to the ranch, and our cowboys were killed, for they sought to entrap the scout, so Half-Breed Harry says, and got the worst of it.

"The scouts are on the watch, evidently, and I decided to come here and give you warning."

"You are very kind, Miss Bessie, and you came to save my life, for but for your coming I feel I should have died, for I was left for dead."

"No, indeed, you would have returned to consciousness all right."

"Perhaps, but I doubt it."

"The Deserter Captain has been here

"This is his work, Miss Bessie."

"Why did he seek your life?"

"He said I had betrayed him, but I had not done so."

"How had you betrayed him, sergeant?"

"You know that I confessed to you that I was one of the Deserter Band?"

"Yes."

"And that the Deserter Captain had made me his ally in some work he had on hand?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is all that I told you, Miss Bessie; but now I have much to make known to you, for he accused me of treachery, and shot me down without a moment's time to pray for my guilty soul.

"He believed he had killed me."

"The coward!"

"Then he robbed me, I find, and went away leaving me dead, as he believed."

"Well, you are to go back with me, and I will send Half-Breed Harry here to-morrow to dig a grave, so as to imply, should he come again, that you have been found dead, and been buried by some one."

"But he will—"

"No, no, I will hear of no excuses, so come with me, and your home is at Ranch Isle as long as you care to remain, for we need your aid and services.

"I can disguise you so that the chief will not know you, should he see you there, and you and Half-breed Harry will get along well together.

"Come, let us gather up your traps, get your horse and go at once."

"I can but obey you, Miss Bessie," was the sergeant's answer.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DON MAKES A MISTAKE.

THE sergeant could but obey the command of Bessie Bond, for such it was, to accompany her. He felt dizzy, wretched, and was glad to feel that he was to have a home.

He was glad also to know that he could protect Bessie and her mother from the Deserter Captain, after all he knew about him, and his intentions toward them.

The secret had been told by the outlaw chief, when he felt that he would silence forever the tongue that could tell it.

So the sergeant was happy that he could hide in disguise away from the Deserter Captain and the rest of the band.

His contact with Bessie and her mother had changed his nature, allowed him to realize fully the life he was leading, and he intended to reform and live a different life in the future.

He had not been a traitor to his captain, had gone back to tell him the truth, and in return he had been coolly and mercilessly shot down.

This was the situation, and he was glad to get revenge and protect them whom the Deserter Captain meant to wrong.

Seeing that his wound rendered him weak and dizzy, Bessie quickly collected his traps, caught his horse and soon they rode off together toward Ranch Isle.

Half-Breed Harry was at the stockade gate on watch and let them in, Bessie saying to him:

"Harry, here is one who is to be our friend, the one who was our guide to New Mexico, for you doubtless recognize him.

"He was wounded to-night and left for dead,

but he will be all right soon and is to be your pard.

"Come up to the house and help us look after his wound, for I know what a good doctor you are."

"I will follow at once, senorita," said Half-Breed Harry, and he did so.

"I really do not know your name, other than to call you sergeant," said Bessie as they rode on together.

"I have not uttered my own name, Miss Bessie, for years, but I will tell it to you—it is Manning Mayhew."

"Indeed! I once heard that name spoken by an army officer, who said that he had been a cadet at West Point with a young man by the name of Manning Mayhew."

"He had been suspected of a robbery there of a fellow cadet and left the academy in disgrace, when a couple of years after it was discovered that he was not the thief, but nothing was ever known what had become of him."

"I will tell you, Miss Bessie, for I was that cadet.

"Innocent as I was, my life was embittered, and yet I entered the army, enlisted in California as a private, and determined to work my way up to a commission.

"I enlisted under an assumed name, and hoped some day to be able to prove my innocence of the crime I was charged with.

"I was made a corporal, for my West Point training had served me well, then a sergeant, next an orderly sergeant and after four years' service I became ordinance sergeant of my regiment.

"One day I was out with an officer who had been a fellow cadet at West Point.

"He recognized me, called me a thief, and I felled him to the earth.

"I knew the consequences, that my brightest dreams had again vanished, and I fled, became a deserter.

"From that day, Miss Bessie, I became a deserter, and my life has been one of misery and bitterness.

"Now you know me as I am, and I am glad that it is in my power to serve you, for I will tell you all that the Deserter Captain is."

"I am glad that you have confided in me, Mayhew, and you will find both my mother and myself your friends.

"Here we are."

They had arrived at the cabin now, and dismounting and hitching their horses Bessie led the sergeant into the house, where Mrs. Bond started at sight of him, and the red handkerchief about his head.

"The sergeant has been wounded, mother, and I will tell you all about it soon; but now we must take care of him, and I have told Harry to come also."

Half-Breed Harry soon arrived, and the wound was most skillfully dressed, after which the cowboy manager of the ranch went out to look after the two horses, and then return to his post at the stockade gate.

The sergeant was given some supper by Mrs. Bond, and he then insisted upon telling the story of the Deserter Captain before he went to the room which he had been given in the cabin.

"The Deserter Captain, you must know," he began, "took great pleasure in telling me everything, as he had made up his mind to kill me, and thus silence my tongue.

"So he told me how he had been the cause of having Captain and Lieutenant Alvarez arrested as conspirators, and had also gotten your brother, Miss Bond, inveigled into Mexico, where he was arrested as being in the plot of conspiracy, and thrown into prison.

"He told me also how he had saved Captain Alvarez from being executed, by demanding that you become his wife, Miss Bessie, and that though you had kept your compact, you had afterward fled from him."

"It is true, sad to say, very true; but you have opened our eyes to the villainy of this man far beyond what he had been thought to be guilty of by us.

"He it was then who plotted to destroy my brother and Captain and Lieutenant Alvarez?"

"So be it, for now I live for my revenge upon Edward Vincent."

"But oh! why was he so cruel toward me?"

"He asserts that you are an heiress to great fortune, and your father knows the secret, and is held in prison until he divulges it," was the sergeant's startling rejoinder.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A VISIT TO RANCH ISLE.

FOREWARNED as Bessie Bond was, in regard to the Deserter Captain, she was forearmed.

She could now understand the mysterious disappearance of her brother, and she believed she could understand how it was that her father had been sent to prison for life, in solitary confinement.

Her brother had committed no crime, yet accused as an American conspirator against the Mexican Government, he had been made to suffer.

Had her father also been innocent?

The proof seemed to have been certain, in his case, of guilt, yet was it?

Was not Edward Vincent—the one-time Texan Ranger, then the fugitive from Texan justice, again Don Eduardo Vincente, and also the Deserter Captain—not at the bottom of all the sorrow she and her family had known?

She remembered that Edward Vincent had held remarkable influence with Mexican officials, though an American, and after all he might have been the one to have plotted ruin to all who were connected with her.

And why?

The statement of the sergeant that she was secretly an heiress, was a clue.

All must be gotten out of the way for Edward Vincent to plot for his fortune through her.

The man, Garcia, who had killed her brother, and whom Captain Alvarez had killed, had been the trusted cowboy chief of Edward Vincent.

So recalling, Bessie felt that her loved brother had been killed by order of Edward Vincent.

The cool manner in which he had shot the sergeant proved that taking life was nothing to him.

The sergeant had not told of the capture of the two officers, and their going into Mexico to be given up, for he felt that it would only distress Bessie and Mrs. Bond for nothing, for they could render them no succor.

So this secret he kept to himself.

There was little sleep for the mother and daughter that night, for they talked over and over again all that they had heard from the sergeant.

"Mother, we must appear not to doubt Edward Vincent; in fact, be more friendly toward him, for we will then get him into our trap, and when all is ready I will spring it.

"Once I have him in my power, beyond all chance of escape, I can make terms for my father's release, and then seek our revenge upon him, for I feel that he is the murderer of my brother."

"I feel the same, Bessie; but it is hard to treat him with decency, knowing all that we do."

"For the purpose we have in view, mother, it must be done."

"You think that he will come here?"

"Oh, yes, and to-day, for he will feel anxious to know if the sergeant told him the truth, and told us anything about him."

"Well, I will do as you say in all things, Bessie, for you certainly have a wonderful power to plan and execute."

"You are a wonderful girl, Bessie."

"Thank you, mamma; but just wait until the end, and see how I will manage it all."

"I fear my life has made me cynical, bitter, perhaps, and I have been guilty of acts my better nature revolted at."

"Why, I was really envious toward Mustang Madge the other day, and almost hated Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, when the truth is they have noble natures, and have acted for honor's sake through all."

"Because we have suffered, we have felt all were against us; but the good people at the fort are our friends, I now feel, and Captain Alvarez held the same opinion."

"He was charmed with Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, in fact with all he met, and told me, Bessie, that if he did not love you he would have fallen desperately in love with Mustang Madge," said Mrs. Bond.

"I could not blame him either, for she is a noble girl, and I believe it is she that Edward Vincent is plotting against."

And so the two talked on over what had happened.

The sergeant the next morning was feeling considerably used up, so was told to remain in bed, and keep quiet by Mrs. Bond, which prescription he was very glad to follow.

Soon after breakfast Half-Breed Harry gave the signal from the stockade that some one was coming to the ranch, and half an hour after Don Eduardo Vincent rode up.

Mrs. Bond could never have received him as she did, but for Bessie, who said almost cordially:

"Why, Don, it was good of you to come and see us just as soon as we returned."

"I heard of your return, yesterday, late, Senorita Bessie, from a scout, and so came over this morning."

"Mrs. Bond, you look well after your long trip."

"Thank you, Don Eduardo, but it was a hard one."

"And where is your escort, the sergeant and his men, for I hope you found them all that you could desire in an escort?"

"Well no, Don Eduardo, we did not, for the men deserted us at the gold mines."

"Deserted you?"

"Yes, the sergeant was hurt by his horse falling upon him and the men deserted, going to the gold mines, so that left us alone, almost."

"This is strange, and if I could catch those fellows they should suffer for their treatment of you."

"But where is the sergeant?"

"Oh, he saw us safely home and then went away in search of you, for he left us at the stockade gate," quietly said Bessie, and her mother was charmed with the nerve she showed under the circumstances.

CHAPTER XXXVI.
THE PROPHECY.

DON EDUARDO VINCENTE showed the deepest interest in the story of Bessie about their trip, asking questions which the young girl promptly answered.

"Where did our friends the Mexican officers leave you?" he asked.

"At the cabin of my poor brother."

"When you first arrived there?"

"Oh, no, not until we were about ready to return."

"Could they not have kept the men from deserting you?"

"They did not know it, for the men started with them to get them on the right trail, and the next morning I found the poor sergeant bound and gagged and learned how the men had deserted to go to the gold mines, and had left him in that plight to prevent him from following them."

"The sergeant had been very badly used by the men, Don Eduardo."

"And then, senorita?"

"With our friends gone, and deserted by the men, we could do nothing but return alone with the sergeant, and he was devoted in his attentions and a fine guide and brave guard."

"And he left you here?"

"Yes, at the stockade, for he was anxious to report to you what the men had done, and said that he had a rendezvous where he could meet you."

"Yes, one was appointed, but I have not been there, so suppose he will await me there, for he dare not come to the fort, as I believe I told you he was one of my band."

"Yes, you will doubtless find him at the rendezvous, Don Eduardo."

"And did you find the grave of your brother?"

"Oh, yes, and we passed days in the cabin where he so long lived as a miner."

"He had been buried in a beautiful spot, and we at least had the satisfaction of seeing his last resting-place and home."

"We also saw the grave of his assassin, for he had been buried down the canyon."

"And do you not expect to see Captain Alvarez again?"

"No, Don Eduardo, for our paths in life go different ways now."

"I don't think he was so handsome, or fascinating as he once was."

"Do you?"

"Well, when I knew him, before I was bound as I am by the tie of wife to you, I thought him one of the handsomest, most fascinating men I had ever seen or met."

"When he was here this time, as I was your wife, I regarded him wholly as one who took my brother's place in my heart, so did not look for powers of fascination in him as in the olden time."

"Bessie Bond, I believe you are a true little woman," said the man earnestly.

"If I was false to myself, I would be to all others, men and women alike, but, thank Heaven, to my own self I am true, and to carry out the idea of the quotation, Don Eduardo Vincente, if not the words, I hence cannot be false to any man."

"Well said, senorita; but when do you next visit the fort?"

"I do not know, but soon, I expect."

"You knew that the English officers had been recalled from New York, I suppose."

"Yes, and were gone away in search of this missing heir!"

"True, with Captain Alfred Taylor and his command, accompanied by Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell, and an old hunter by the name of Trapper Dennis."

"They have every reason to hope that they will find the heir, have they not?"

"Well, Trapper Dennis brought news that there were white captives among the Sioux, and the heir was one of them, so they hope to rescue them in some way, but just how I do not know."

"For some reason Surgeon Frank Powell returned to the fort last evening, and he may or may not have brought important news for Colonel Loyal, though I could not find out last night."

"Do you know aught of this heir, Don Eduardo?"

"I?"

"Yes."

"How should I know, Miss Bessie?"

"Well, knowing you as I do, as the Deserter Captain, and that your outlaw band were said to be the allies of the Sioux, I did not know but that you might be aware whether the heir was dead or alive?"

"Oh, no, I am not informed upon this point, senorita, and I fear you deem me worse than I am."

"It is true that I am sailing under false colors at Fort Beauvoir, that I am the secret leader of a band of outlaws, who take toll from Government and rich travelers sometimes, but that is about all, and I must live you know."

"Oh, yes, and that you must live other men must often die."

"What do you mean, senorita?"

"I mean that you sometimes have to take life to get gold, do you not?"

"Sometimes a man forces it upon my band to kill him, yes," was the answer.

"Well, it is a lawless life you lead, and a double one, Don Eduardo, and sooner or later your sins must find you out, so take my advice and change your evil ways before too late."

"You are very kind to lecture me, for it shows an interest I had not believed you felt in me, senorita."

"But I merely came over to welcome you and your mother back again, and to tell you not to be surprised at the rumor that went the rounds of the fort that you had gone to Mexico to become the bride of Captain Leon Luiz, while I was to go there to stand trial for a crime alleged to have been committed some time ago."

"People will talk, senor, and I have no doubt most absurd rumors are afloat about us."

"But, as you must go, let me tell you that we will be glad to see you at Ranch Isle when you have leisure to call."

"Thank you, senorita, I shall avail myself of your kind invitation."

And as the man rode away Bessie mused aloud:

"You will yet end your life upon the gallows, Edward Vincent, is my prophecy, or all signs fail."

CHAPTER XXXVII.
IN THE NET.

THE trap which Bessie Bond hoped to see Don Eduardo go into had been set much sooner than she had anticipated it would be.

In fact, after all she had heard from the sergeant about the baseness and treachery of this Deserter Captain, and she felt sure that the death of her loved brother had been through his instigation, Bessie Bond had decided to plot to bring the man to justice, and her prophecy had been that she would do so.

And this she meant to do, but in her own time and way.

It was true that she could jump upon her horse, ride over to the fort and denounce the man to Colonel Loyal, and short work would be made of him as the Deserter Captain.

But there was a compact between the Don and herself which she did not wish to break in that way.

She knew him as the outlaw leader, the Deserter Captain, and he could betray her as being his wife.

She shrank from this being known, especially as he would also proclaim that her father was then undergoing a life-sentence in prison.

For her mother's sake, as well as her own she shrank from this knowledge becoming known, as also that they were hiding under a name which, though her mother's before she was married, was not then legally her own.

She had pride, and she did not wish that it should be cruelly humbled.

In her own time and way she determined to bring Don Eduardo to justice, but it should not be at the shame of her mother, herself, her dead brother and her imprisoned father.

Though she had driven Leon Alvarez from her, yet she hoped that he might one day cross her path again.

She had never lost one atom of her love for him, only she had exiled him from her because she was bound to Edward Vincent.

When that hateful tie was severed, and she could not believe that it would last through her life, she would wish to meet Captain Alvarez again.

So she mused to herself after the departure of her visitor.

Mrs. Bond had not the heart to remain in the presence of one she looked upon as the instigator of the murder of her son, and so she left him to Bessie.

But, she watched him ride away, and asked:

"Bessie, how much longer will it be that we must entertain this outlaw?"

"Until the trap is set and sprung, mother, that ends his life, without bringing shame upon us," was the answer.

"Heaven grant that it may be soon," said Mrs. Bond.

Bessie smiled, yet did not reply, and soon after the sergeant came out upon the piazza, stating that he was beginning to feel like himself once more.

"You saw him, Maybew?"

"Yes, Miss Bessie, and I could have killed him without one thought of regret."

"Bide your time, for his days are numbered," was Bessie's answer.

In the mean while the Don had stopped at the gate for a word with Half-Breed Harry, after which he rode on his way toward the fort.

He did not care to go through Skeleton Gap it seemed, for he took the long trail around, the way he had come to the ranch.

He went at once to his cabin, and entering sat down to the dinner which Amigo had prepared for him, and the man was a good cook, while the Don would have the best of everything.

The Don's quarters were commodious and pleasant, a cabin of four rooms.

It was furnished as well as the quarters of any officer at the fort, and there was every indication about that the Don loved his comfort,

and got all the luxury out of life on the frontier that he could.

"Any news, Amigo?"

"No, senor, only Colonel Loyal wished to see you when you can come to him."

"Indeed! what can he want of me?"

"The orderly hinted, sir, that he was going to ask you to return to the command on the war-path with Surgeon Powell, as he had no officer he could spare, and wished to ask you to go as acting *aide de camp* to Captain Taylor."

"Ah! this is a compliment on the part of Colonel Loyal which I cannot refuse."

"I will go over and see what he has to say, and if he wishes me to go, Amigo, you are to accompany me."

"Yes, senor."

"We will go well prepared for comfort, with plenty of stores, Amigo."

"Yes, senor."

"You did not learn, Amigo, why Surgeon Powell returned alone from the front?"

"Not exactly, senor, but it is rumored that it was for more troops to support Captain Taylor."

"That is doubtless the case," was the Don's answer.

Soon after he walked over to the fort, and visited headquarters, where he found that it was true that the colonel wished to ask him to go as a volunteer *aide* to Captain Taylor.

He accepted with pleasure, and went to his cabin to notify Amigo and prepare for the long trail.

And so it was that he rode away with Surgeon Powell and several scouts and soldiers—rode away with the officer scout who had tracked him from the scene of his last lawless act at the head of The Deserters, and who knew him as he was in reality, an outlaw leading a double life.

And into the Surgeon Scout's net he went, to find himself in the toils beyond escape, and thus he taken on to the command where he discovered that the retreat of The Deserters had been found, his men killed or taken prisoners, and that he had but one chance for his life, and that was to use his influence to release the white captives from the Sioux, and to make known who the lost heir was whom the English officers had come to America to discover.

That he bought his life upon these terms the first two chapters of this romance have made known; but though entrapped as Don Eduardo Vincente, as the Deserter Captain he was still free to work evil against others.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RENEGADE CHIEF.

HAVING brought the past scenes in the career of the Deserter Captain up to the time when, tracked down by Surgeon Frank Powell and Buffalo Bill, he sold for his life the secret he possessed of who the lost heir was, and the release of the white captives from the power of the Sioux, I will now continue on in my romance to reveal the incidents following upon the setting free of the man whose life had been so filled with evil deeds.

That he had, at one time, been the ally of the Sioux, and risen to power among them, was true, for he had become a chief of their tribe, and been known as "Evil Eye."

With the hand of his own race raised against him, a fugitive from justice, yet dangerous, the man who had been in turn Texas rancher, Mexican conspirator, Sioux chief, Don Eduardo Vincente and the Deserter Captain, turned his steps to the only haven of refuge open to him, the Indian village where once he had held power.

Fortunately for himself he had, while the Deserter Captain, remembered his Indian allies well in gifts, and all weapons which he captured, not needed by his own band, had been sent to them, along with fine horses for the chiefs, blankets and various trinkets.

When therefore he had sent word, at the demand of Surgeon Powell, that he would be scalped alive and sent to their village, if the white captives were not released at once and allowed to return with the messengers, two of the Deserter band, the Indians obeyed his bidding and freed their prisoners.

It was therefore to the village of the Sioux, far up in the mountains, that the renegade made his way, after his mysterious meeting with the old hermit known as the White Spirit, and who also held a strange influence over the red-skins, though he did not dwell among them.

But this influence he had gained by warning them several times of danger to them, and preventing utter destruction to their village in a number of instances.

So on his way went the renegade, while he plotted as to what his future course would be.

He could not but realize that his being discovered by Surgeon Powell to be the Deserter Captain, and so cleverly trapped by the officer and made a prisoner, had wholly ended his plans as formed regarding Bessie Bond and her mother.

He knew well, that upon the return of the soldiers to the fort, his treachery and double life would all come out, and Bessie Bond would soon know that his secret was known to others than herself and mother.

She had, however, not made known to the two Mexican officers her knowledge that he was an outlaw chief, and, as the Surgeon Scout had told him that he did not connect the dwellers at Ranch Isle with him, he did not believe that the Bonds would commit themselves by saying one word as to their acquaintance with his secret actions.

"What I do must be quickly done, for those Englishmen will not remain long at the fort, now that they have found the lost heir, and through me.

"No; they will take the girl to England very quickly unless I kidnap her, and that will end my plans with regard to her.

"But that I must see that they do not do, by kidnapping her.

"Then I will look after the fair Bessie and her mother, and see that I win my game in that quarter.

"If I lose the heiress, Mustang Madge, I will have the other heiress, Bessie Bond Norcross, to make a fortune out of.

"But I must get both, and to do so the Deserter Captain must show that he is by no means harmless, or dead.

"No, no; they shall feel my sting with a vengeance, and I will lose no time in striking my blow, for delays are dangerous, and a few days might ruin all.

"Come, good horse, we must make better time, for we are going among friends, a people who are not so particular as to the laws of *meum* and *tuum*, and the breaking of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill!'"

He uttered a sarcastic laugh as he spoke, and driving the spurs deep into the flanks of his horse, rode on more rapidly.

He appeared to know every foot of the way, and took the trail leading to his old retreat, where The Deserters had been in hiding, some miles from the head village of the Sioux.

This retreat Buffalo Bill had led the command of Captain Taylor upon, and thus had the outlaws been surprised and their belongings captured.

To this retreat the renegade chief now made his way, and as he reached the scene he stood gazing upon it.

"Only such men as Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Frank Powell would dare lead a force here, right on the edge, as it were, of the Sioux's head village, where a thousand warriors could be hurled upon them within two hours' time.

"But those two men are to be feared all the time, and if I hang, I fear they will be the ones at the other end of the rope.

"But even they shall not drive me from my purpose.

"Yes, they ran off all my horses, and got considerable booty, too; but then they did not find what was *cached*, and I'll give that to the Indians to get them in good humor, for I am sure they are in a sullen mood after the loss of their white captives.

"Now for the village of the Sioux."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

RED SOLDIERS.

THE head village of the Sioux was so situated that half a dozen sentinels, stationed at certain points six miles away, could give warning of an enemy's approach while yet a considerable distance off.

By the time the force reached the sentinel's position, a number of warriors, by a signal, could be called to the passes, and the enemy checked, and it would take a large army to invade the Indian village, unless by a night surprise.

Then, too, there was always a large fighting force in the village, it was a depot of supplies and the greatest stronghold of the Sioux.

The renegade knew the approach well, and when he came into view of the sentinels he gave a signal which he knew they would understand.

Reaching the pass he was met by the Indian guard, to whom he spoke in their own language and who received him with the deference due a chief.

A young chief was there, on his rounds of the sentinel posts, and he accompanied the renegade on up to the mountain ridge where the village was located.

Straight to the village of the head chief Death Hand the renegade went.

He saw that the Indians were in a sullen mood, though they greeted him with a certain degree of respect.

The head chief, however, was most cordial, as he was very sure, from past experience, that the coming of the White Renegade meant a special gift to himself.

The Death Hand was greeted also most warmly by Evil Eye the Renegade, who took good care to at once hand him over a purse of silver, and to state that he wished to take some braves with pack-horses to his retreat, to bring back booty that was *cached* there, and give them to his red brothers.

The next day this expedition was made, and the sullen mood of the Indians was dissipated.

Their pale-face chief had more than repaid them for their loss of their white captives.

To Death Hand the renegade explained how his friendship for his red friends had gotten him

into trouble, and that had they not sent the captives, his life would have been the forfeit.

In the Indian village were three of the outlaws who had escaped from the retreat, and there the renegade sent for.

They were about the best men of the band, the Deserter Captain was glad to see, and each one of them was in reality a deserter from the army.

"I have determined to at once take the trail again, men, and I need your aid," he said, when they had come to his tepee.

"My plan is to have our retreats as before, and to work the trails constantly, after I have accomplished a certain work I have in view.

"Your comrades have been slain, and we must avenge them.

"The sergeant I sent upon a special mission, and he betrayed me, so I killed him.

"We four are all that remain of our band that once numbered fifteen.

"We must be stronger, better than even now, and I'll tell you how we will do it.

"You never knew me before by face, for I wore a mask, but now we are all to go masked; and no one will know us.

"Now your name is Kirby, is it not?" and the renegade turned to one of the three men, a bold-faced athletic man with soldierly bearing.

"It is, sir."

"Well, you shall be my lieutenant, and rank next to me."

"Thank you, sir, I'll endeavor to prove myself worthy of your trust."

"I feel that you will."

"Your name is Dickson, is it not?"

The renegade addressed another of the men, and one whom he knew as one of the best of the band.

"Yes, captain."

"Well, Dickson, I'll make you sergeant, and you, Pike, shall be corporal of the band," and the renegade turned to the third one of the outlaws.

"I thank you too, sir," the newly appointed corporal said, while "Lieutenant," Kirby remarked:

"May I ask, captain, how we are to get the private soldiers of the band?"

"It will be easy enough, for we have all here that we need."

"Here, sir?"

"You observed that I kept the uniforms that we took from the *cache*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I shall take my pick of Sioux warriors, and we must have just three platoons of eight braves each, so that each of you can have a squad to work.

"We will dress them as soldiers, mount them well, arm them thoroughly, and with drilling they will soon make good soldiers."

"The very idea, captain."

"And as all of us will go masked, no one will know that the Deserters are red-skin soldiers.

"That is my plan, men."

"And a good one it is, captain."

The three men all expressed themselves as delighted with the new formation of the band, and after a talk with Death Hand, the renegade began to pick the braves to belong to his command of outlaws.

He took those of finest stature, powerful, athletic fellows of great endurance, and who were superb riders, fineshots and brave as mountain lions.

They were all content to wear uniforms, ride military saddles and bridles, and to be armed as the pale-faces were, and to drill as their white chief wished them.

Thus was the new band of Deserters soon organized by the outlaw captain, and within a week after his being set free the daring renegade chief was again on the trail of mischief.

CHAPTER XL.

THE HEIRESS.

THE mission of Captain Taylor's command up into the Indian country had been more than accomplished, and it was with glad hearts that one and all set out upon the march back to the fort.

Not only had the white captives of the Sioux been released, but the missing heir to fortune and title in England had been found.

The two English officers, Lord Lucien Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder, had eagerly scanned the faces of the unfortunate captives, when they were brought to Captain Taylor's command by Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Frank Powell and those who had accompanied the two noted plainmen.

The English officers were looking among the captives for Granger Goldhurst, their kinsman, or some one of his family.

They questioned the captives closely, and all they could learn from them was that Granger Goldhurst had been a settler in the valley which had been the scene of the terrible Indian massacre, and that he was supposed to have been killed.

His family had been made captives, and what had become of them no one of the rescued prisoners appeared to know, save that they believed all were dead.

But while questioning the captives, Lord Lonsfield and Sir John were called away by Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill.

"You do not find any news of Mr. Goldhurst, gentlemen, from the captives?" said Surgeon Powell.

"Not a word."

"Well, I have something to tell you of a discovery made by Buffalo Bill and myself.

"We started upon this duty of finding the lost heir, as we told you, upon a blind trail.

"But we kept our eyes and ears open and are now ready to tell you just what discoveries we have made."

"We shall certainly be glad to hear, Surgeon Powell, for Sir John and I have felt that you were working secretly as well as having the soldiers under Captain Taylor for a backing," Lord Lonsfield said.

"Well, gentlemen, as Captain Taylor has now joined our group, I will tell you just what Buffalo Bill and I have found out," said Surgeon Frank Powell, just as a tall, soldierly young officer joined the party about the camp-fire, for the command had camped upon its way to the fort.

"Fire away, Powell," said Captain Taylor.

"Well, I need not review all, any more than to say that Buffalo Bill suspected certain parties at the fort and its vicinity of being double-lived, and he consulted with me upon the subject, and we got as an ally-detective in our absence Miss Madge Burton.

"We came to the conclusion that one person at the fort was guilty, and I took the trail of that one.

"I picked it up at the retreat of The Deserters in their attack on you, Lord Lonsfield and Sir John, and while Buffalo Bill and Trapper Dennis came on up into the mountains to await the arrival of Captain Taylor's command, I followed my man to Fort Beauvoir.

"I found that he was a dweller outside the fort, and I discovered enough to know that he was the Deserter Captain.

"What I could not just make out was his friendship with others who appeared of a different style, yet must know his secret, it seemed.

"Now, I am confident that they were deceived in him as all others were.

"This man I, with the aid of Colonel Loyal and a little strategy, got into my power, along with his pard, and then made him confess all.

"He was the Deserter Captain, and recently an ally of the Sioux, with whom he had once lived, and he knew all about the white captives of the red-skins.

"He was leading a double life at the fort, acting as spy, and was thus enabled to strike severe and successful blows when he wished to do so.

"The man was Don Eduardo Vincente."

This startling piece of information was received with amazement by the two Englishmen, and Surgeon Powell continued:

"Now, the wretch deserved hanging; in fact, burning at the stake, as Indians serve their prisoners, would not have been more than he deserved.

"But he held important secrets, and so I sold him his life for those secrets.

"I knew that he, alone, could get the white captives from the Sioux, and so we offered him his life to do this, and one other thing.

"You know that the white captives were released, and among them you hoped, gentlemen, to find your kinsman, Granger Goldhurst, or his family.

"In this you were disappointed, but we had the means of finding out what we sought to know, through having Don Eduardo in our clutches.

"This was our second condition for giving him his life and freedom, that he was to tell us all he knew about Granger Goldhurst and his family."

"And he did so?" eagerly asked Lord Lonsfield.

"Yes, he did so."

"Now, we are to bear the truth," the nobleman said.

"Yes, for he told us that the man you sought was dead, that his wife, her brother, and her child had been taken captives to the Indian village.

"There, the wife had died, and the brother, a young man, had sought to escape with his sister's child.

"In doing so, he had lost his life, but he had managed to tie his little niece in the saddle of his own horse, and sent him adrift upon the prairie.

"The Indians had failed to capture the horse, but a command of the Fifth Cavalry, led by Buffalo Bill, had found the animal astray one night, and thus—"

"Madge Burton is the heiress!" cried Lord Lonsfield, while Sir John Reeder eagerly exclaimed, excitedly:

"Yes, we have found the lost heir; she is Granger Goldhurst's daughter.

"Buffalo Bill, you and Surgeon Powell deserve all the credit for finding the lost heiress."

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIERS.

FORT BEAUVOIR received a shock which moved it to its center, when the sentinel reported the command of Captain Taylor returning,

and that in their midst were a number of white captives.

That the expedition had been one of success, this fact was sure proof.

First came the chief of scouts, Buffalo Bill, some distance ahead of the command, and his scouting corps of a dozen splendid plainsmen followed in single file, like an Indian on the trail.

The gallant captain came next, with the two English officers, one on either side, the bugler behind them, and following was Lieutenant Otey Onderdonk with the troop of cavalry he commanded.

The two guns followed, then the white captives and pack-horses, another troop of cavalry and scouts bringing up the rear.

Then loud and long were the cheers that rent the air as the brave little command filed into the fort.

The flag was dipped in their honor, and the fort band struck up "See, the Conquering Hero Comes."

The ladies were cheered as they waved their handkerchiefs, and the whole settlement from beyond the stockade walls had rushed in to give welcome to the return of the heroes.

The horses and men had the appearance of having suffered hardships, and there were soldiers along with their arms in slings, bandages around their heads, and others more unfortunate, who had to be brought back on *travois*.

The captives showed their sufferings, yet their joy now overshadowed all they had been forced to endure.

The command was not dismissed until Colonel Loyal received them in a neat little speech, and told them how much he appreciated all that they had accomplished.

Then the soldiers were glad to get to their barracks, the officers to their quarters and the captives to the places assigned them, while the wounded were cared for in the hospital.

Captain Taylor went to the colonel's quarters and made a report of the expedition, and he was accompanied by Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder.

Then the whole story was told, and the ears of Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell must have tingled, for their names were constantly mentioned, and always with expressions of the highest praise.

The colonel already knew what Don Eduardo Vincente had proven to be, but he had expected that he would be brought back to the fort to be tried for his crimes.

But Captain Taylor stated that the Surgeon Scout had traded his life for the secret he held, and wished to make his own report of the affair to Colonel Loyal.

So the Surgeon Scout was sent for and Colonel Loyal said:

"See here, Powell, I hear that you have been cheating the gallows out of its just prey."

"Yes, sir, I weighed the matter thoroughly, talked it over with Buffalo Bill, and decided to act upon my own responsibility."

"I knew that you would not, could not in fact, sir, sanction the release of the Deserter Captain."

"That is very true, Surgeon Powell."

"But I felt that his life, weighed against the lives of a score of unfortunate captives, and the secrets he held, was not to be taken into consideration, and so I made the trade, fully confident that it will not be very long before we get a chance to hang him."

"You simply gave him a respite, eh?" said the colonel, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, that was all, for Cody and I are going to catch him yet, as I suppose he will return to his old trade as a renegade chief of the Sioux."

"Doubtless; but what was his secret?"

"I am going to ask you to go with me, sir, to the home of Chaplain Burton, and you will soon hear it, and these gentlemen, with Buffalo Bill, are to follow."

"All right, Powell, I am at your service, for I am sure you have something of interest to make known."

The colonel and the Surgeon Scout then departed for Chaplain Ben Burton's pleasant quarters, and Captain Taylor, the two English officers and Buffalo Bill were to soon follow them.

Mustang Madge was in the sitting room with her adopted mother, while the chaplain was reading to them.

The visitors were cordially welcomed, and the Surgeon Scout was congratulated upon the success of the expedition after the captives, when he said:

"Our success was greater in another way, too, Miss Madge, for we were so fortunate as to discover the lost heir for whom our English friends have been in search."

"You all know the story how Granger Goldhurst settled in the valley, and his family were all massacred or captured with others?"

"Well, it seems that the settler was slain, his wife, child and his wife's brother were captured, and taken to the Sioux village."

"Mrs. Goldhurst died in the village of the Sioux, her brother attempted to escape with his

niece, was killed, and yet the little one got away."

"She was tied upon the saddle by her uncle, and the horse ran away from the Indians and was found by Buffalo Bill, guiding a party of the Fifth Cavalry, and still upon his back was the little girl—"

"Oh! Surgeon Powell!"

"I remember all now, but it was like a dream before, a dream I could not recall."

"Yes, I remember how my brave young uncle fought for his life and mine, and then forced my horse to run away from the pursuing Indians."

"Oh, how vividly now I see that terrible scene," and Madge covered her face with her hands, as though to shut it out from her vision.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE STORY TOLD.

THERE was no doubt whatever in the minds of any one, after hearing the story told by the Surgeon Scout, and the recalling of the scene of her escape by Madge, that she was the child of Granger Goldhurst.

Doctor Powell then went on to tell how he had gotten at the truth of the affair through the pretended Don Eduardo Vincente, and just as he finished his recital the other party arrived at the amazed chaplain's quarters.

"Miss Madge, let me tell you now that you have two kin-men, bound to you by kindred blood, in Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder, but they can never regard you with more sincere affection than do the officers and men of the Fifth Cavalry," said Surgeon Powell.

"Nor than I, your adopted parent, my dear Madge," the chaplain remarked.

"Let me, my dear cousin, congratulate you upon your good fortune in the discovery of who your parents were, though I believe you can never be any happier as Lady Madge Vancourt than you have been as Lady Madcap Madge, the Daughter of the Fifth."

"Yet, still I am happy in finding in the lost heir of Vancourt, the daughter of Granger Goldhurst, one so well worthy of the noble race to which she belongs," said Lord Lonsfield, while Sir John Reeder added:

"Yes, we are indeed proud of our little kinswoman."

Congratulations came rapidly then from the others present, but Buffalo Bill voiced the feelings of the Americans when he said:

"If you strike the trail across the big pond, Miss Madge, you will have to take the Fifth Cavalry along as an escort, for we can never give you up."

The tears came into the beautiful eyes of Madge as she replied:

"And how can I give you all up?"

"You tell me, Lord Lonsfield, that I am of noble birth, that I am Lady Vancourt, heiress to a proud title and a large fortune, and yet do you know that I would rather this moment remain what I have been, Mustang Madge, the Daughter of the Gallant Fifth than be Queen of England."

"Ah! I suppose I am ungrateful for my good fortune, ungenerous to you, my two noble cousins, who have been so devoted in your long search, yet I have been reared a border girl, I love the free air of the frontier and its people, rough and uncouth as many of them are, and I wish that here I could live and die."

"You can do that too, Miss Madge, as well as be Lady Vancourt, for you can go to England, tire yourself to death with fashionable life and flirtations and then come back here and marry one of the Fifth," said Surgeon Powell, and Madge answered quickly:

"I will do it."

There was certainly no doubt of Madge being the heiress, as the clothes she had on, a locket containing a likeness of her parents, and the father's miniature being recognized as that of Granger Goldhurst by Lord Lonsfield and Sir John, were conclusive proof.

Then too Madge recalled the scenes which had been mercifully shut out from her before in all their terrors.

She remembered the valley home, the massacre and the captivity in the Sioux village.

She recalled how her uncle had sought to escape with her and all that followed, though all had seemed like a blank to her before.

Quickly the news spread over the post, of the fortune in store for Mustang Madge, but grief mingled with the joy, as it would take her away from the fort.

"You will have to compromise, Lord Lonsfield, you and Sir John, by remaining with us as long as you can, that we may become accustomed to the thought that we are to lose Miss Madge," said the colonel, and this opinion was echoed by all at the fort.

"So it was decided that the lovely young heiress and her kinsmen should not depart from the fort for a month or six weeks, and that when she did go, Chaplain Burton and his wife were to also accompany her to England."

"Well, if I have got to give up the wild life of the border, and I suppose I will have to, I am going to enjoy all I can of it before I leave, that is certain," said Madge, and she made up her mind to take daily rides, hunt and fish to

her heart's content, for as The Deserters were annihilated, and the Indians were keeping close, there was considered little danger in her going and coming.

Having heard of the return of Bessie Bond and her mother, and always liking them, Madge made up her mind one morning to dash down to Ranch Isle and see them.

She went out of the fort like a flash, mounted upon her favorite horse Rocket, and carrying her repeating-rifle and belt of arms as usual.

She determined to take the trail through Skeleton Gap, for the daring girl knew no fear, and did so.

She drew rein as she passed through the weird canyon and gazed cautiously about her.

But she saw nothing of the ghostly kind to fear, and when out of the canyon, went rapidly on to the ranch.

A new man was at the stockade gate, one she had not seen before.

He was a large man, with long, heavy beard and hair, and he wore a broad-brimmed sombrero which cast his face in deep shadow.

He was in hunting shirt, leggings and top-boots, and arose at her approach and walked to the gate.

"I wish to see Miss Bond, please," said Madge, politely, and the man bowed, raised the heavy gate by aid of the windlass, and said:

"You'll find her at the house, miss, and her mother, too."

"Thank you," and Madge dashed on, while the man muttered:

"And she, too, is one of the Deserter Captain's intended victims."

"But no, it shall not be."

CHAPTER XLIII.

BESSIE'S WARNING.

WITH only Half-Breed Harry of the old force upon the place, Bessie Bond felt that she must remain closer at home than she was wont to do.

It was true that he had no arduous duties to perform, yet it was necessary for some one to be constantly on watch at the gate, or near if needed.

Manning Mayhew had rallied quickly from his wound, and the day after his coming said that he would go to the guard cabin and take up his quarters with Half-Breed Harry.

This he said he was able to do, as he suffered little inconvenience from his wound.

So Bessie fitted him out a disguise of a false beard, wig and heavy sombrero, to put on should he see any one coming, and Mayhew admitted that no one not even the Deserter Captain would recognize him, and he was correct in this, for it did, with his change of dress, completely metamorphose him from what he had been as the sergeant of The Deserters.

"We must secure more men, mother, for in case of a raid by red-skins, we would be almost defenseless," Bessie had said, after Mayhew had gone to take up his quarters at the stockade.

"Yes, my child, and in case Vincent should attempt any act of treachery we should have the force to thwart him," added Mrs. Bond.

"I will ride over to the fort and ask Surgeon Powell to select several men for us, for I have great confidence in him and feel that he would send no one except those whom we can trust."

"It was a misfortune that those we had made an attack upon Buffalo Bill in our absence, for it would imply that we knew their lawless character; but Half-breed Harry explained how it was to the scout, he told me."

"Yes, Bessie; but see, there comes some one toward the ranch."

As Mrs. Bond spoke, Mustang Madge came into view at a gallop, and a moment after drew rein, leaped from the saddle and threw her rein over the hitching rack.

"Glad to see you back, Miss Bond, and you too Mrs. Bond, and I rode over to tell you so," said Madge in her frank hearted way.

"We are indeed glad to get back, Madge," said Mrs. Bond, and then the maiden remarked:

"Well, I have some news for you, and I do not know whether I am to be congratulated or not."

"What is it, Madge?" asked Bessie Bond with considerable interest.

"You know those two splendid English officers who have been visiting at the fort?"

"Oh, yes, Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder."

"Yes, well, they are cousins of mine, for I am proven to be the daughter of the heir they came to find, Granger Goldhurst, my father."

Both Mrs. Bond and Bessie were amazed and urged Madge to tell the whole story, which she did, and then she said:

"Now I suppose you wish to know how it was found out?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, the expedition started under Captain Taylor to find the heir and endeavor to rescue the white captives in the Sioux camp and the brave boys did both."

"But it was done through one whom you know, and who you will be surprised and pained to hear is a villain."

"Who is he?" asked Bessie with a gasp.

"Don Eduardo Vincente."

"Oh Madge!"

"It is true, for he is no more a Mexican gentleman than I am, and has been living a double life at the fort, for he was a renegade in the Indian camps and lately none other than the Deserter Captain."

"Madge! do you know this?"

"Oh yes, for Surgeon Powell tracked him down, and he had either to get those captives set free or hang."

"He came to terms, and he was set free, after his hand had been wiped out."

"Set free, Madge, was that man set free?"

"Yes, it had to be done, or the captives would not have been released and I, the heiress, would never have been found, don't you see?"

"Where did he go?"

"Back to the Indians to turn renegade again, Surgeon Powell said."

"Ah! Madge, we will have cause to fear that man, for we will hear from him again," said Bessie sadly.

"Do you believe it?"

"I know it."

"Then Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell will have to take his trail and kill him."

"He will not be so readily killed."

"You know him then?"

"I know, Madge, that we have discovered a great wrong he once did us, and another he sought to do us."

"Why, do you know he told me that you had gone to Mexico to marry Captain Leon Luiz, that handsome but arrogant Mexican officer, to whom you had been engaged for some time."

"He told you this, Madge?"

"Yes, and that the captain and that splendid Texan had come here after him, as he had been banished for some crime he was innocent of."

"He was going with you, and you were not to return, while Emerald Ed, the gambler of Devil's Acre, was to purchase Ranch Isle."

"A tissue of lies, Madge, from beginning to end, I assure you."

"In the first place he did not go with us only a short distance, but furnished the men, who left us in New Mexico, so that we returned with one man."

"We went to New Mexico to visit the grave of my mother, who was killed in the mines, and our escorts, Captain Luiz and his companion left us there."

"That is the true story, Madge, and I am glad that you have found Don Eduardo Vincente out as he really is, but I am distressed most deeply to know that he has been set free, for I warn you that he will do mischief, that he will strike at you, at me, and be guilty of more acts of evil than years can wipe out."

"Oh, Madge! go back to the fort and warn Colonel Loyal to be on the watch for that man—nay, I will go with you myself," and Bessie hastily went out to get her horse and return with Madge.

CHAPTER XLIV.

ON THE WATCH.

MADGE could not but be impressed with the earnest manner of Bessie Bond.

As the little detective for Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, she had kept a close watch upon Don Eduardo and also upon Bessie Bond.

She had made the discovery that the two met in Skeleton Gap more than once.

She had also become convinced that there was more between the Don and Bessie Bond than they allowed outside appearances to show.

What it was she was anxious to find out.

Now she was certain that Don Eduardo had told her this story about Bessie going to Mexico to wed Captain Leon Luiz, simply to further his own ends.

He certainly had not gone, and yet being absent he had been proven by Surgeon Powell to have been leading his Deserters into acts of crime.

Now even Bessie Bond did not tell Madge all she knew of the Don, but she was sure that the fair Maid of the Ranch was honest in her warning to beware of the man.

So it was that Bessie accompanied Madge back to the fort.

She had mounted a roan mare of wonderful speed and great endurance, and had armed herself thoroughly for her ride.

As they passed out of the stockade, the disguised sergeant raised the gate and touched his hat politely, while he said:

"Don't go too far, Miss Bessie."

"Why not, Mayhew?"

"Well, miss, it is hardly safe."

"I am going to the fort."

"Will you not let Harry or I accompany you, Miss Bessie?"

"Oh, no, thank you."

"It will be night by the time you get back, Miss Bessie, if you remain long at the fort."

"I shall not remain long, and will perhaps have an escort back home."

With this the Maid of the Ranch rode on with Madge, who said:

"He takes a deep interest in your safety, Miss Bessie."

"Yes, he knows the danger, though he is not aware that the sins of Don Eduardo have found him out."

"Had you not better leave word with him that you will remain at the fort, and be my guest to-night?"

"No, thank you, I must return, for mother is all alone."

"But see; this mare is well-named, Flash, and she can run half a day and not mind it."

"Then, too, I am well armed."

"Shall we go through Skeleton Gap?"

"Oh, yes, for I came that way."

"You do not fear the weird place and its legends?"

"Oh, no; I have nothing to fear, and I do not believe in ghosts."

"You have the Deserter Captain to fear, mark my words, so keep a watch for him."

"I hardly believe he would come near the fort, even if he had much to gain by so doing."

"You do not know him, that is all; but let me show you something about this canyon."

"Certainly."

"Would you suspect an opening in that wall of rock yonder?"

"No."

"Follow me."

Bessie led the way to the left, turned into the pine thicket, thence through the narrow crevice in the rocks into the false canyon.

"Why, Miss Bessie!"

"A camp here, and—a grave!"

"Yes."

"And a grave only recently made?"

"Yes."

"You know about it?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Try me."

"Well, this false canyon was the rendezvous of the Deserter Captain and the man whom he sent as our guide with us to New Mexico."

"He gave the guide a plot to carry out, and when he returned and told him that he had brought my mother and myself back with him, that he had not carried out the nefarious plot against us, why the Deserter Captain shot him down without mercy."

"Ah! what a villain!"

"Well, he did it, and that proves how much you have to fear him, and again, Madge, I warn you to beware."

"But what have I to fear from him?"

"Much."

"But he it was who told that I was the heiress the two English officers wished to find."

"True, and knowing this you have more cause to fear him, for he is bold, aggressive, unscrupulous, and will leave nothing undone to gain his ends."

"But what can he do now?"

"He has gone to the Sioux village, you said?"

"Yes."

"He was a renegade chief there once?"

"Yes."

"He had the power to make the Indians give up their white captives."

"Very true."

"This proves his power, and if he has gone back to his red allies, it is for a purpose."

"But what can he do?"

"Much."

"I do not exactly understand how."

"Well, as a white man who has turned renegade to the pale-faces, he has much influence with the warriors."

"He can urge them to do as he deems best, and as a renegade chief in the head village of the Sioux, he can lead them on an expedition for scalps that will raise many a wail along this border, for he will not come unless he has a thousand or more red-skin braves to follow his lead."

"I will see Colonel Loyal myself, Madge, and urge upon him watchfulness, for that man will strike and strike quickly, mark my words."

The warning, words and manner of Bessie Bond deeply impressed Madge, and she said:

"Well, Miss Bessie, we will go at once to Colonel Loyal, and you tell him what you believe the Deserter Captain will do."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE WARNING HEEDED.

COLONEL LOYAL was a splendid soldier.

A fine disciplinarian, he was also one who saw that his men had all the comforts, good food and recreation which could be allowed them.

He was courteous to officers and men, and enjoyed social life to its fullest extent, while he never neglected a duty and was as watchful as a hawk.

The result was that he had a fine command and made fine soldiers.

He had been particularly anxious to check the raids of the red-skins, to encourage settlers and to put down outlawry upon the plains.

Coming to him as they had he was most desirous of aiding the two English officers in their effort to find the heir for whom they were in search, and it was a great delight to him

that Mustang Madge, the idol of the fort, had been proven to be the heiress.

With this explanation of the courteous and able commander of Fort Beauvoir, I will turn to the visit of Bessie Bond to the post, where she returned with Madge.

As she entered the fort curious eyes were upon her, yet she showed no consciousness of knowing that she was particularly observed.

She had the knowledge now that it was said she had given her many admirers at the fort the mitten and had gone to Mexico to wed Captain Leon Luiz, and had not done so.

Then she was aware that it was believed that there was some tie existing between Don Eduardo Vincente and herself.

But, as though she was ignorant of all comment, all gossip regarding her, Bessie Bond smiled as sweetly as ever, and bowed even more graciously than before to the numerous salutations that greeted her.

She went with Madge at once to Colonel Loyal's quarters, and that officer came out most gallantly to aid them to alight.

"I have come for two reasons, Colonel Loyal, first to ask to consult one of your officers about some men I desire to employ upon my ranch, and, also, to say that I have heard from Miss Madge the story of Don Eduardo's double life, and treachery."

"Yes, Miss Bond, that scoundrel was run to earth through the skill and pluck of Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill."

"But, he has not been run to earth, for he was set free, Colonel Loyal."

"He bought his pardon, Miss Bond, in exchange for over a score of poor, unfortunate prisoners in the hands of the cruel Sioux, and again, for a secret he possessed which caused Miss Madge to find out who her parents were, and, also, to become the heiress to a title and fortune."

"Very true, Colonel Loyal, and all well worth the life of any criminal, you will say, as I do; but there are exceptions to all rules, and Don Eduardo Vincente, as you know him, but Edward Vincent, as I know him, is that one exception."

"He is a man above all other men to fear, and I came with Miss Madge, as she said that he had gone back to his allies, the Sioux, to urge you to send out your scouts, have your sentinels doubled about the fort, and be ready to repel an attack, for even now that man may be on the march here with a couple of thousand warriors at his back, and such a force with a surprise, might even cause you a great deal of trouble."

"You are right, Miss Bond, and I thank you for your warning, for I had, with others, supposed the Deserter Captain, as he calls himself, was too glad of his escape from death, to come this way again."

"He is not a soldier, sir, but was once a captain of a company of Lancers in Mexico, and I believe deserted his command, though he was then supposed to be a Mexican."

"He is a man to fear, sir, and I cannot refrain from giving you a warning which I hope you will respect."

"I will show you to what extent I heed and respect it, Miss Bond," and the colonel called for his orderly.

"Orderly, go to Major Sidway, Captain Taylor, the adjutant, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, and request them to come at once to my quarters."

"I will leave you now, Colonel Loyal, as I have some business to attend to in the settlement," said Bessie Bond.

"No, I beg you, and Miss Madge, to remain and hear what I have to say to these gentlemen I have sent for, Miss Bond."

Bessie Bond bowed and obeyed, and soon after Buffalo Bill entered.

He seemed a little surprised to see Bessie Bond there, but Surgeon Powell entered soon after and following came Captain Taylor, then the adjutant of the post and Major Sidway.

"Gentlemen, I have information which causes me to believe that the Deserter Captain, he whom we knew as Eduardo Vincente, has gone to the Sioux village with the idea of sweeping down upon us with a large force of braves."

"Should such be the case, we certainly do not wish to be found unprepared, so Major Sidway I desire you to see to it that the command is ready to move at a moment's notice, while you, Cody, are to take your scouts and make a wide circuit of the fort, pushing some of them up as near the Sioux as you dare send them."

"I will go myself, sir, on that mission," promptly responded the chief of scouts.

"And Captain Taylor, I wish you to go out with a couple of troops to have them within call of Cody, if he needs them."

"I will be ready, sir, within the hour," was Captain Taylor's response, while Buffalo Bill asked:

"Any other orders for me, sir?"

"None, Cody."

"Captain Taylor, I will make the rendezvous at the White Cliffs, sir, which is a good camping-place for you," and saluting the chief of scouts departed, with a bow to Madge and Bessie Bond.

Captain Taylor also departed, and Major Sidway followed him, while the adjutant was called to one side by the colonel, after he had said:

"Surgeon Powell, I believe Miss Bond wishes to speak with you."

The surgeon at once approached Bessie, while Madge would have withdrawn, but was detained by the Maid of Ranch Isle, who said:

"It is nothing private, Madge, for I only wish to ask Surgeon Powell's advice about getting some cowboys for the ranch."

"The other men, as he is aware, proved to be traitors, and yet as they were justly punished, I should say nothing against them now."

"But it has left us at the ranch with only Half-Breed Harry and the man who returned with us to New Mexico, and I beg you, Surgeon Powell, to name some good men whom I can employ, if you will be so kind."

Surgeon Powell was silent a moment, while his thoughts were busy, for he felt sure that in asking him to recommend the men, Bessie Bond would wish him to feel that she did not care to have any one on the place who was not honest, and to be relied upon.

"I will do as you wish, Miss Bond, and send you the men; but how many will you need?"

"Eight, sir, please."

"I will go at once to the settlement and find the men for you, sending them over to-night, as you must not remain unprotected."

CHAPTER XLVI.

GOOD MEN AND TRUE.

THERE was no better person to ask the favor of securing the men needed for Ranch Isle, than Surgeon Powell, for he knew every one in and about the fort.

If a man had a shady record, the Surgeon Scout was aware of it.

If he was worthless, and not prone to work, he knew it.

If he was a good fellow in hard luck, willing to work if he could get work to do, the surgeon was aware of the fact.

Then, too, he could pick out the good border-man and the bogus one.

He knew the bully and boaster from the man who understood what the profession of a plainsman was.

If a man preferred cards and rum to attending to his duties, somehow Surgeon Powell had discovered his failing.

"The fair Belle of the Border has discovered how her cowboys sought to kill Cody, the night he stayed at Ranch Isle, and she does not intend that we shall feel that she allows such men to hold sway upon her place."

"I will get her the men, and good ones too, and she has the name of paying good wages."

"Now I am sure she put the colonel on this task of preparing against a raid led by the Deserter Captain, and it is strange that neither Cody or I thought of his doing such a thing."

"But I admit that it is more than likely that he will do so."

"He is a man of resources, that same Deserter Captain, and a couple of thousand mounted, well-armed red-skins would follow him blindly under a promise of scalps."

"That the Sioux gave up those captives is proof that they held him in high esteem, and Miss Bessie Bond knows more of that man than she will admit."

"She has met him before his coming here, and there is some deep mystery at the bottom of it all."

"What that mystery is I must find out, yet I do not believe she is an ally, or has been, but that she has been sinned against, and is help by some secret power she cannot throw off."

"The visit of those two friends of hers, the Mexican and Texan, meant more than was apparent upon the surface."

"Well, there is an old saying, set a thief to catch a thief, and I guess that will apply to a woman as well, so I'll put the fair detective Madge to discover just what the game is which Miss Bessie is playing."

"She certainly cannot be friendly with the Deserter Captain if she has given Colonel Loyal warning of what that fellow may do."

So mused Surgeon Powell as he rode over to the settlement to pick out the men he wanted for Ranch Isle.

The community was an odd one, for there were cowboys, teamsters, ex soldiers, miners, as they claimed to be, and any number of gamblers, hangers-on, dead-beats and desperadoes in general.

The Surgeon Scout went to the Devil's Acre, which was run in a quiet way by day, and in full blast by night.

Emerald Ed, the gambler landlord, was ill in his quarters, it was said, and the Faro Fairy only went on duty at night, so the gambling saloon was run by a manager.

There were a number of games going on however, plenty of drinking and a crowd of loafers and hangers-on about the place.

The surgeon looked the crowd over and called to a man among them to come to him.

"Jerry, what are you doing now?" asked the Surgeon Scout.

"Nothing, sir, but Chief Cody told me he would take me into the scout corps as soon as he needed more men."

"Well, Jerry, I know you to be a good scout, and a sober, square man, and I've work for you."

"I thank you, sir, I'm ready this minute, for I'm badly down at the heels just now."

"You have your horse, outfit and weapons?"

"Oh, yes, sir, and that is all I have got."

"Well, I want you to go to Ranch Isle as cowboy, and you'll get good pay, and comfortable quarters and no very hard work."

"I'm glad to go, sir, and I thank you, Surgeon Powell."

"Where is your pard, Derringer Dick?"

"He's at our camp, sir, and down in the mouth bad, at our luck."

"Take him with you."

"Oh, but this will be good news for Dick."

"And Angel Jim?"

"He was here a moment ago, sir."

"Is he doing anything?"

"Watching and waiting, sir."

"Then he goes too, so find him."

"I'll do it, sir, and thank you."

"Now, who else can you name who are good men, for mind you, Jerry, I trust in you to do the square thing by me, for I pledge myself for you, and on the ranch are only Mrs. Bond and her daughter you know."

"Yes, sir, and they are dandies, I learn, and don't fear anything."

"Well, there are quarters at the stockade for the cowboys, and the men will not have to be out in bad weather to watch cattle and suffer hardships."

"There is a cowboy chief there, and his name is Half-Breed Harry, for he is a mongrel of some kind."

"But I wish you to be as sweet as peaches and cream to him, and only study him, keep your eye on him and let me know just what you size him up as after you have been there awhile."

"His word is law there, and there is another man whom I do not know."

"Remember, you go into the service of Miss Bessie Bond, and you are only to play the spy on Half-Breed Harry for me, upon no one else."

"Yes, sir; I understand."

"Now, who else can you get, for I wish eight good men?"

"There's Banjo Bob, sir."

"A good man."

"Nebraska Joe."

"Excellent."

"Idaho Ike."

"The very man."

"Bowie Knife Ben."

"Also all right."

"And Mustang Miko."

"And he'll do; so get your men and start at once for Ranch Isle."

"I will, sir."

And while Soldier Jerry, as he was called, went to collect his squad of cowboys, Surgeon Powell returned to the fort to report his success to Bessie Bond.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE FAIR FERRET.

WHEN Surgeon Powell returned to the fort, he met Buffalo Bill and a dozen of his scouts just starting upon the trail.

"Well, Bill, you are off, I see."

"Yes, Frank, and I have discovered that we were taught a lesson by that very mysterious young lady, the Maid of Ranch Isle."

"You mean that we relied too much in the Deserter Captain?"

"Altogether."

"He certainly has it in his power to strike a blow if he wishes, for the red-skins will be only too willing."

"They will, indeed, and I am going to scatter my men to see that they do not give us a surprise, if they are intending to come."

"Captain Taylor will follow, and so we can have a force to check them until we get word to the fort."

"Yes, and I will, of course, go with Taylor; but what do you think of the fair Bessie?"

"I do not know; but she had enough influence with the colonel to start him out for war, as she certainly told him something to cause these movements of caution and preparation."

"That is so; but do you know that the fair Bessie sought my aid to help her secure some men for the ranch?"

"No!"

"Yes, and that would indicate that there were no more there than those whom you called to their last account."

"Where is that scamp, Half-Breed Harry?"

"Ah, he is there, and will be chief of cowboys, and she has one other man on the place, with the negro man and woman servants."

"She said she wished eight more men, and she is wise, in case the Deserter Captain should pay her a visit expecting only to find several defenders there."

"And you got her the men?"

"Just now, for I found Jerry Joslyn and he picked out seven other good fellows."

"Yes, he is a good man and would take none whom he could not trust."

"If Miss Bessie wishes brave defenders and good cattlemen she has got them in Jerry and his pards."

After a short while longer spent in conversation the two friends parted, Buffalo Bill hastening on to overtake his scouts, while Surgeon Powell went on to the fort.

He found Bessie Bond at the chaplain's, with Madge, and she asked somewhat anxiously:

"Did you get the men, Surgeon Powell?"

"Yes, Miss Bond, and you can rely upon them."

"When will they come?"

"They are preparing to start now, and here is a list of their names, as they were given to me by Jerry Joslyn."

"He is a man whom you can rely upon in every particular, and he has gotten for you seven good and square men."

"I thank you sincerely, Surgeon Powell, for your kind efforts in my behalf, and some day will prove my appreciation of it, I assure you."

"But now let me tell you, as I know your skill as a scout, do not let there be any lack of caution and watchfulness, for that man you allowed to go free means mischief I am certain."

"You suspect him, or do you know, Miss Bond, what his intentions are?"

"I know, from a past sad experience, that he strikes quickly and cruelly, and though you may think he was content with getting off with his life, he is just the man to plot the moment that he was free."

"But again I thank you, and urge care."

"Buffalo Bill and his scouts have gone, Miss Bond, Captain Taylor and his troopers follow soon, and the fort is on the *qui vive*, so cannot be surprised."

"But now let me ask you one question?"

"Certainly."

"Have you no desire to ask for a guard of soldiers at Ranch Isle?"

"No, not with the men you have gotten for me, the two I have, and—myself, if you do not consider it conceit in my saying so."

"You are worth a dozen men, Miss Bond; but I am sure that the colonel would give you a force to go into camp there, if he thought you needed protection."

"Oh, no, for fortunately we are well situated for defense, and it would take a very large force of red-skins to get over the stockade wall with half a dozen brave defenders behind it, and Ranch Isle, with your men can raise double as many; but now I must be starting upon my ride home."

"You will certainly let the colonel give you an escort home, Miss Bond."

"No, indeed, thank you, Surgeon Powell."

"Then let me send for Jerry and his men to accompany you."

"No, I have nothing to fear, for I am splendidly mounted and well armed."

Urging was useless, though Madge and Mrs. Burton also joined in the request that Bessie Bond should not go alone, so Surgeon Powell went out and raised her to her saddle and bade her farewell.

Away she dashed with a kiss of finger-tips to Madge, and soon after was flying across the prairie at a sweeping gallop.

"Miss Madge, I have a favor to ask of you," said the Surgeon Scout.

"Yes, Doctor Powell, it is granted."

"I wish you to find out just what Miss Bond knows of the Deserter Captain, and what hold he has upon her."

"It is a hard task, Surgeon Powell, to find out anything from a woman which she wishes to keep secret."

"You are wise beyond your years, Daughter of the Fifth; but do your best for me," and the Surgeon Scout hastened to his quarters to prepare for the trail he was going on with Captain Taylor and his troopers.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A MEETING IN SKELETON GAP.

THE Maid of Ranch Isle won many admiring remarks upon her beauty and pluck, as she dashed out of the fort to go alone upon her ride to her home.

The sun was near the western horizon, and even did she go by way of Skeleton Canyon, night would overtake her before she had gotten half-way home.

There was a moon, yet it was still a lonely ride of it for a man, and certainly for a young girl.

But Bessie Bond never thought of fear, and as a proof of it she turned off on the trail, so faintly marked, in comparison to the broad one, leading through Skeleton Gap.

It was just growing twilight as she rode into the canyon. She then drew her horse to a walk and appeared to enjoy the wild, weird scenery.

She passed the false canyon, turned into the broader part where the monument of rocks was, and stopped suddenly as she beheld a horseman coming toward her.

The horseman, sighting her at the same instant, also drew rein.

He was mounted upon a black horse, wore an

officer's uniform with straps on the shoulders, and would have been taken for one from the fort, but for the fact that he wore a polished brass helmet with the visor down, and over which floated the horse-hair plumes of red, yellow and black which Bessie Bond had seen before.

He wore gauntlet gloves, top-boots armed with massive brass spurs, and all else was military in his costume and equipment, for a sword hung by his side, and a scarlet sash was about his waist.

"Heaven have mercy!"

"It is the Deserter Captain!" said Bessie Bond in a tone of awe as she recognized the horseman who confronted her in Skeleton Gap.

He recognized her also, and said as he approached:

"Well, Miss Bond, we meet again."

"We do, sir," and her voice was firm and fearless in spite of the almost sickening dread that possessed her.

"This weird spot seems to be a favorite resort of yours."

"Oh, yes; I like it, and I was anxious to show it to some friends of mine by moonlight."

"Friends, and whom?"

"From the fort, where you no longer dare go, sir."

"Ah! you have heard then—"

"Everything."

"Of course you did not betray me."

"On the contrary, I have had hard work trying to convince Colonel Loyal that I was not your ally, as my cowboys attacked Buffalo Bill at Ranch Isle in our absence in New Mexico, and my meetings with you were known."

"Then I cannot consider you a traitress there?"

"You cannot, especially as in betraying you, sir, I would bring shame upon myself, as your wife."

"Well said; but, who then betrayed me?"

"Yourself, for you forget, when you performed your deeds of outlawry against those English gentlemen, that such men as Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell were near. They at once took your trail, the former tracking your men to their retreat, the latter trailing you directly to the fort."

"Thus you betrayed yourself."

"It is doubtless true, and I should have been more careful."

"You do not seem to learn by experience."

"How do you mean?"

"You are here, within a few miles of the fort, within call of your foes."

"I am here for a purpose, and am not unprotected."

"True, yet may you and your Indian allies have been tracked here."

"Hah! who said that I had Indian allies?" he asked quickly.

"Your Deserter band was wiped out, and you took refuge in the Sioux village, so who else have you except your red-skin allies?"

"You reason well; but, are you my ally or my foe?"

"I am your wife."

"That does not answer me."

"What shall I say?"

"Are you my friend or my foe?"

"Were I your foe I would have gotten you out of the way ere this."

"Then I am to consider you my friend?"

"What have I done to disprove it?"

"Well, you have not allowed me to claim you before the world as my wife."

"Nor will I yet—not until I see my way clear for the future."

"If you are not my foe prove it," he said peremptorily.

"How?" she demanded.

"Aid me to get possession of a prisoner whom I seek to have in my power."

"Who is he?"

"It is a woman."

"Ah! then I will not aid you."

"Jealous, eh?"

"Call it what you will, but I will not aid you to kidnap a woman."

"I was in hopes that you would, and more."

"What more?"

"That you would consent to give her refuge in your home for a while."

"In other words, be her jailer?"

"Yes."

"Well, did I consent it would be of no avail."

"Why?"

"Because Surgeon Powell thought it was best to garrison the ranch."

"What?"

"I say that it was thought best to garrison the ranch."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that a party of horsemen left the fort late this evening to take up their quarters there."

"Hah! cavalry?"

"Yes, and guns, too."

"What, cavalry and artillery both?"

"That is not all."

"Girl, I am glad you told me this."

"Nor is this all."

"What more is there to tell?"

"I may as well warn you that there is some

movement on hand at the fort, and the red-skins are the cause of it."

"You have indeed given me news; but, as I can not get possession of the girl I wished to kidnap, I will have to content myself with taking you as a hostage for it seems I may get into trouble."

CHAPTER XLIX.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

THE words of the Deserter Captain almost froze the heart of Bessie Bond with horror.

There before her was the man she hated, and whom she would be glad to see go to his death upon the gallows, as the one whom her brother owed his sufferings and death to.

But she was alone, and she did not believe that the Deserter Captain was.

He barred her way homeward and he held her at his mercy.

True she might be able to draw a revolver and kill him, but he was quick to see and act, and might anticipate her.

Still the splendid nerve of the girl did not desert her.

She would play a game of what on the border was known as "bluff."

So at his words she laughed merrily.

"It seems to amuse you."

"It does."

"Why so?"

"Because you are not able to carry out your wish."

"How is that?"

"To take me as a hostage."

"Why not?"

"In the first place you dare not make the attempt."

"Dare not?"

"So I said."

"I dare do anything."

"Oh, yes, where your neck is not in the noose of a rope the other end of which is held by Buffalo Bill."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you make the slightest attempt to carry out your threat against me it would be the signal for your death."

"I don't see how."

"Did I not tell you that I had come here to show a party of friends this grim canyon by moonlight?"

"Ah, yes, I remember your words now; but where are your friends?"

"Enjoying a camp supper in a false canyon not far away where was found the form of a man in uniform, one who was our guide to New Mexico, and whose grave you may find if you search there for him."

"Did you know that he was dead?"

"You refer to the sergeant?"

"Yes."

"I knew that he was dead, for I shot him as he was going to betray me."

"You tell me that your friends are there?"

"Within easy call and a force behind me at the head of the canyon, while others are to come this way from Ranch Isle to escort me home, for it is dangerous riding abroad now."

The man glanced nervously about him.

He did not for a moment doubt the words so cleverly uttered to imply and yet avoid the lie direct as much as possible.

"Well, again let me say that I am glad that I met you, for I was going to the canyon to camp to-night, and others were to join me there later on."

"You and they will find company you may not care to meet."

"Which way are you going?"

"Back to my friends, who must be getting anxious about me."

"Go with me to the entrance to the canyon, in case we meet any one to pass me by them, and you can then return to your friends."

"No, I will not go beyond easy call of those who can protect me, and will."

"But you must."

"Attempt force and I will call Buffalo Bill."

He dropped her bridle-rein as though it were red-hot iron.

"Curse you! I meant you no harm."

"Then leave me, for you will hardly meet any one in the canyon if you go now."

"I will go, yes, but you will see me again, girl, and before very long."

"It may be, but, remember, if you come to grief I have warned you of your danger in being here so near your foes."

"I shall not forget your kindness, Miss Bond."

"Good-night."

He turned his horse as he uttered the words, and rode slowly away down the canyon.

Bessie Bond drew her revolver and for a moment it was in her heart to take chances on his capture.

But, dead-shot though she was, she did not wish to kill him herself, and if she demanded his surrender he might force her to fire, or even shoot her, unless she first fired on him.

"I could send a bullet straight through your coward heart, Sir Deserter Captain, and thus avenge my brother."

"But I will not," she muttered, as the moonlight fell full upon the outlaw chief, as he rode

away from her, the visor of his brass helmet down, and the plumes waving gracefully over his head.

Unconscious of the danger he was in, and little dreaming how cleverly he had been deceived by the daring girl, the Deserter Captain rode on down the canyon, and soon came out upon the plain.

As he did so he heard voices out upon the plain, laughing and talking together, but they were too far off for him to see them.

He also heard hoof-falls, and said:

"Yes, this is a very dangerous locality for me, and I must head my band off or they will get into trouble."

"Those men are a party of scouts, and they are on the main trail to Ranch Isle."

"I had hoped to make Skeleton Gap my retreat for the band, but that is impossible now."

"No, I must seek the Eagle Cliffs, for they are within a few hours' ride of the fort, and I do not believe even Buffalo Bill or Surgeon Powell would suspect that there was a secret retreat there."

"Now to head off my Deserters, before they run upon a band of scouts or a squad of cavalry, for that would spoil all."

"As I cannot take the girl to Ranch Isle, as I had hoped to do, I must find another hiding-place for her."

"Hah! what a bright idea flashes upon me!"

"Yes, the bolder the better, and I will carry out the idea, for no one will suspect that hiding-place, that is certain."

"Now to head off my men and to guide them to Eagle Cliffs."

"Yes, and we must cover up our trail too."

With this the Deserter Captain started off at a canter toward the mountains.

CHAPTER L.

THE COWBOYS' ARRIVAL.

IT was with a beating heart that Bessie Bond saw the Deserter Captain ride away in the moonlight.

She watched him until he disappeared into a shadowy form in the distance, and then she slowly followed him.

He rode along to the entrance, keeping in the center of the canyon, where the moonlight fell upon him, for she saw it glimmer upon his polished helmet.

She kept in the shadow, so as not to be seen, and, had he turned to retrace his steps she would not have dared face him.

The thought entered her mind as to what she would do under the circumstances, and she was determined to open fire upon him and then take to flight, for she had confidence in her horse that he could reach the fort ahead of the animal ridden by the outlaw.

But when she reached the mouth of the canyon she saw the Deserter Captain riding far off over the plains.

She too had heard the distant voices of the party of horsemen and she felt safer.

"They are my cowboys," she muttered.

"Yes, the ones that Surgeon Powell has sent to Ranch Isle."

"I must ride rapidly on, for mother will be anxious about me, and then I wish to send word to the fort this very night that the Deserter Captain is abroad and has red-skins with him, but how many Heaven only knows."

"He would hardly come so near without a large force, and yet he said that he had intended seeking the false canyon, and not over fifty horsemen could find refuge there, if so many."

"Now we must fly, good horse."

So away darted the animal at her command, and quickly the miles dropped behind him.

Soon there came into view the distant glimmer of a light, and Bessie felt relieved, for she knew that it was in her frontier home.

A moment after she dashed upon the neck of land while a ringing voice challenged slowly:

"Halt! hands up!"

"Ho, Mayhew, you are on duty I see?" she said.

"Yes, Miss Bessie, and as you were in the shadow of the thicket I did not recognize you."

"You are not back at the stockade?"

"No, Miss Bessie, I was going to scout around a little to see if I could hear your horse's hoofs coming, for I was growing anxious."

"I am all right, but I had a narrow escape, for I met some one in Skeleton Gap on my way home."

"In Skeleton Gap?"

"Yes."

"Not a ghost, Miss Bessie?" and the man smiled.

"Oh, no, but one who ought to be a ghost."

"Hah! the captain."

"Yes."

"And he is so near?"

"He is! but have any cowboys arrived?"

"Yes, eight of them, and Half-Breed Harry went up to the cabin with them to report to your mother."

"They came about a quarter of an hour ago."

"Good!"

"And they look like a fine set of men, Miss Bessie."

"Well, they are, Mayhew; but will you ride to the fort for me to-night?"

"To the fort?"

"Yes."

"I will go, certainly."

"If you fear to go, Mayhew, I will send Harry."

"Oh, no, let me go, Miss Bessie."

"I only thought of what I once had been and am now."

"Well, don't feel blue, for you will come round all right in the end."

"But no one will recognize you in your disguise, and I wish you to see Colonel Loyal and tell him for me that I met the Deserter Captain in Skeleton Gap, and that I discovered that he had Indians near, but how many I could not find out."

"I only saved myself by pretending to have Buffalo Bill and other friends within call."

"He rode away in a northwesterly direction to head off his braves from going into Skeleton Gap."

"Then I came home."

"Tell Colonel Loyal just what I have said, and that the Deserter Captain is here for mischief."

"I will, Miss Bessie, tell him just what you have said."

"Am I to return at once?"

"Yes."

"I am glad, for I would rather not risk my disguise in the daylight."

"Yes, it is best not to do so."

"Now, I will send Harry back to the stockade, and so you be ready to start at once when he arrives."

The man now leaped over the stockade wall and raised the heavy gate, when Bessie rode through and dashed on to the house.

She found the cowboys just finishing a substantial supper which Mrs. Bond had had served for them, and she glanced into the faces of the men whom Surgeon Powell had secured for her with the gaze of one who read every feature with a look.

They bowed politely, and stood in line a splendid-looking set of men, rough maybe, some of them illy clad, but all well armed, and with the look of men who were to be trusted.

"The Surgeon Scout sent us to report to you, miss, as cowboys for your ranch, and as your mother was growing anxious, we were about to look you up."

"I am Jerry Joslyn, miss," and the cowboy bowed again.

Bessie frankly extended her hand, and said:

"I am glad to meet you, Jerry."

"Introduce me to your pards, so I will remember them by name."

This Jerry did, and with each one Bessie shook hands and said:

"Boys, this is to be your home, and I wish you to feel that it is."

"Mother lets me be boss here, so I'll give you your orders when necessary."

"I like the looks of each and every one of you, and we will be friends I know."

"I have reason to know that there are redskins about to-night, so be on the alert, for you were heard laughing and talking when you passed near the lower end of Skeleton Gap to-night."

"Harry here will show you your quarters at the stockade, and remember, he is the Cowboy Chief."

"Good-night, boys."

CHAPTER LI.

THE COURIER FACES AN ORDEAL.

THE frank, cheery manner of Bessie Bond completely won the cowboy band who had come to serve her at Ranch Isle.

Mrs. Bond had welcomed them cordially, but there was a certain *bonhomie* manner about the Border Belle that was irresistible.

She fascinated them from the start, and they at once looked up to her as a leader.

She had won their admiration by her great pluck, and the mystery hanging about her made them regard her with a certain awe.

She had come alone from the fort by night, had passed through Skeleton Gap, from what she said, and had heard their voices, while she had given them to understand that she knew there were redskins about, a fact that they had not suspected.

Half-Breed Harry at once led them away from the cabin, but there was a look in his face as though he was not pleased with the cowboys who had come to the Ranch, even though Bessie had let it be known that he was their chief.

As he left the cabin Bessie called out:

"Place the men in quarters, Harry, and do you stand guard, for I have ordered Mayhew to start for the fort when you return to the stockade."

Half-Breed Harry did as ordered.

He always obeyed the commands of Bessie Bond without a murmur and with no show of reluctance, no matter what he might be told to do.

The cabin of the cowboys was one of four rooms, all in a row, and built of stout logs.

The front wall ran up like a breastwork, and through it were rifle-ports, where the men could rest secure and command the approach of the stockade for the distance of several hundred yards.

There were ladders in the rear by which the men could ascend to the roof, which slanted from the front.

Two of the rooms were large and one was used as a sitting-room in bad weather, the other as a sleeping-room.

These were at either end.

In the center was a kitchen and dining-room, and next to it was where the men kept their bridles, saddles and outfits.

In the rear was a shed for the horses kept ready for use.

The new men were delighted with their quarters, and were at once divided into two squads, one under Half-Breed Harry, the other under Mayhew.

Then Half-Breed Harry took his position with one of the men to show him how a watch was kept.

"In times of danger, we have a wire stretched yonder at the commencing of the neck of land, and if ridden or walked against, it rings a bell in the cabin, so as to give warning."

"As Mayhew is out now, we will not set the wire," he said.

In the mean while, Mayhew had ridden rapidly on his way toward the fort.

He, too, held no dread of the spot, once so nearly fatal to him, and so fatal to others, for he went by the trail leading through Skeleton Gap.

He passed through the Gap without meeting any one.

All was as silent there as the dead about him.

Then he struck off rapidly on the trail to the fort.

It was nearly midnight when he reached there and the sharp challenge of the sentinel brought him to a sudden halt.

"Halt!"

"Who comes there?"

"Friend!"

"A courier with important information to Colonel Loyal," was the reply.

The corporal of the guard was called, and soon after the colonel's orderly announced to him, as he was sitting in his quarters chatting with Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder, that a courier had just arrived and wished to be admitted to his presence.

The English officers arose to go, but the colonel bade them remain and ordered the courier admitted.

The tall form of the sergeant of The Deserters entered, his beard and long hair certainly looking most natural.

He removed his broad sombrero as he entered, and revealed a bandage about his head.

"Well, sir, who are you and where from?" said the colonel, as the man saluted with the precision of a soldier.

"Shall I speak out, sir?" and he glanced at the English officers.

"Yes, my man."

"I am not a military courier, sir, but a cowboy of Ranch Isle, and bear to you a message from Miss Bessie Bond."

"All right, let me know what it is."

"She was returning from the fort to-night, and met in Skeleton Gap the man known as the Deserter Captain."

"Ha! this is news."

"She met him face to face, before she had time to escape, and she discovered that he was still dressed in his uniform as the Deserter Captain, and though alone had not far away Indian warriors with him, though how many Miss Bond was unable to discover."

"How did she escape from him?"

"She used strategy, pretended to have Buffalo Bill and a party from the fort within easy call, and told him that Ranch Isle was garrisoned and Skeleton Gap was to be also."

"Then he departed, as she supposed to warn his warriors and he took the northwest trail, she said."

"Miss Bond then rode rapidly to the Ranch and sent me to report to you, sir, what I have told you, while she says that she is sure that the Deserter Captain is bent upon mischief, and, but for the belief that she was not alone, would have kidnapped her."

"I am much obliged, my man, for your information, and present my compliments and thanks to Miss Bond, to whom, please say, that if she desires a small force to camp at the Ranch Isle as a protection, she need only make the request and I will send the soldiers at once."

"Orderly, ask the officer of the day to come to me, and see that this man has safe conduct out of the fort."

Then, as the colonel saw the salute given by the courier he said:

"See here, my man, you have been a soldier."

"Yes, sir."

"In what regiment?"

"The Second Heavy Artillery, sir, B. Company," and the man gave the name of a regiment which he knew was stationed upon the coast.

"What made you leave the service?"

"I sought to gain position and rank, sir, and

failing after three trials, got my discharge and turned scout and cowboy, sir."

"You should not have been so easily discouraged, for it is just such men as you that the service needs."

"What is your name?"

"Manning, sir."

"Well, Manning, if you care to re-enlist, come to the fort."

"Thank you, sir," and the courier departed, while the colonel said:

"It is just such men as that we need to make good soldiers."

"I have met that man somewhere before, and yet where I do not know."

"But he has a history; I am sure, and there was more in his leaving the army than he admits."

"I wish I could place him."

But the colonel could not do so, although he had once been Manning Mayhew's commander.

CHAPTER LII.

MYSTERIOUS TRAILS.

THE courier from Ranch Isle started back upon his night-ride, after his interview with Colonel Loyal.

He had passed through a severe ordeal, for he had met the colonel when he was a cadet at West Point, and received from his hands a prize won at the end of his first year at the Academy.

He had again met him when, under an assumed name, he had enlisted in his regiment, hoping to win his way up to promotion and honor.

Thrice had his hopes been dashed to earth, and with broken ambition and an embittered heart he had turned to outlawry.

He had become, as he said, a moral wreck, and he was on the highway to go still further down the grade, when he had been selected by the Deserter Captain as the man to carry out his plans of treachery toward the Mexican officers and Bessie Bond and her mother.

But the outlaw chief had reckoned too much upon the depravity of others from his own standpoint, and so had made a mistake in the selection of the sergeant for the treacherous work.

Brought in contact with Bessie Bond and her mother, the man whose life had been wrecked by false accusations, had begun to feel that the future was not all a blank before him.

He began to realize that at least he was not as bad as he had believed.

The result was his change for the better and saving Bessie and her mother from the power of the Deserter Captain.

This done he began to hope for the future and endeavor to atone for the past.

What bitterness rushed upon him as he stood before Colonel Loyal, holding a rank he had once hoped and striven hard to reach, can only be conjectured by those who can enter into sympathy with one of his nature.

He had passed through the ordeal and with grim face turned the head of his horse back to the ranch.

He had been intrusted with an important mission by the one who had changed his life, and though he had risked much, as a deserter, to face Colonel Loyal, he had done so unflinchingly.

So back to the ranch he rode, passing once more through Skeleton Gap, and without adventure.

Ride rapidly as he, and others, might, beyond this weird canyon, there was something in the atmosphere of this place which caused one to draw his horse down to a walk, and regard calmly the ghostly scene through which he passed.

Once beyond the canyon Mayhew urged his horse on more rapidly and reached the stockade before the gray of dawn lightened up the East.

He was promptly challenged by the cowboy on guard, one of the new men, but giving the countersign rode up to the gate, which was raised to admit him.

The moon had set and all was darkness, so he sought his blankets until an hour when he could report to Bessie Bond.

When breakfast was over the courier was at the house and made his report.

"Did the colonel ask any questions, Mayhew, that would imply a suspicion of me?"

"None, Miss Bond."

"I know that with some I am under suspicion, and I do not wonder at it, while, after having given the warning to be on guard against a surprise from the renegade, it seems strange that I should be the first and only one to meet him."

"Still, miss, I do not believe the colonel connects you with the Deserter Captain."

"I hope not, and I trust the trails will be seen this morning to indicate that the man and his redskins have been about."

"But another thing I do not like is that Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Captain Taylor's command went toward the mountains yesterday, while, with the Deserter Captain and his redskins near here this is the place for them to be."

"I wish, Mayhew, you would accompany me

with several of the new men, and I'll take a look at the trails."

"With pleasure, Miss Bessie."

Soon after Bessie Bond rode away from the ranch, and upon one side of her was Mayhew, upon the other Jerry Joslyn.

Behind them came Angel Jim, Banjo Bob and Nebraska Joe.

Bessie Bond rode straight to the entrance to the Skeleton Gap and said:

"Now pick up a trail here going northwest."

"Here's one coming from northwest that leads into the canyon, miss, and the same one takes about the same trail back again," said Jerry.

"You are right, so we will follow that one."

The party set off at a gallop, the new men showing that they were skillful trailers and readers of frontier signs, for all of them discovered some little thing here and there to make mention of.

At last they came, after several hours' ride, to where the single trail met one made by a number of horses.

"Thirty tracks here, miss, meeting this one," said Jerry after a quick examination.

"They halted here a few minutes then all turned back and yonder goes the trail."

"Shall we follow it, miss?"

"It does not lead toward the fort."

"No, miss, away from it, and not toward the Sioux country either."

"We will follow it," said Bessie in her determined way.

CHAPTER LIII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

BESSIE BOND had gone but a short distance with her trailers, when she called a halt.

"I wish a man to go from here to the fort for me," she said.

All volunteered, but she selected Angel Jim, a man whose sanctimonious look had won him his name.

"Say to Colonel Loyal that I took the trail of the Deserter Captain from the Skeleton Gap, followed it to this point where it joins the tracks of thirty other horses, and I send him word to have him dispatch a troop after me, as I will follow on and mark the track as I go."

"Yes, miss."

"It will take you an hour and a half good riding to reach the fort, and considerable over that before you return to this point, so I will be all of four hours ahead of the command, but push on with all speed."

"Yes, miss," and Angel Jim was off like a rocket.

Then on went Bessie Bond and her cowboys following the trail, and no halt was made until noon, when they went into camp for an hour's rest and dinner.

Again they resumed their way, and the trail now led toward a range of mountains wild in the extreme.

After an hour's further travel the land became so barren, rocky and hard that it was with the greatest difficulty the trail could be discerned at all, and then only here and there in places where a hoof had slipped on the rocks.

Coming to a mountain stream, dashing through its rocky bed the party halted, for there was no sign that the trail led beyond.

It could have done so and remained unmarked, though only for a short distance, as the ground beyond was soft, and a trail could readily be seen.

It could have led up or down the stream, by wading the horses in the water, but the question was which way did it go.

To find out, Bessie Bond halted and went into camp, while the cowboys staked out their horses, and set to work on foot to discover the trail.

Thus several hours passed, and two of the cowboys came in, all reporting their want of success.

Jerry and Mayhew were the last to come in, but they had the same story to tell: they could find no trace of the trail.

Bessie was disappointed.

She knew that the men with her were experts in border craft, yet she could not help saying to herself:

"If only Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell were here I believe they could find that trail, for somehow they seem to be governed by instinct in all that pertains to the border."

Soon after Jerry reported a party of horsemen in sight, and arrangements were made to fight if necessary.

But those coming proved to be Angel Jim guiding a party of troopers from the fort.

At the head of some forty horsemen rode Lieutenant Onderdonk, and by his side was Madge Burton, who had insisted upon coming along, as she was to meet Bessie Bond.

The young girl was anxious to do just what Surgeon Powell had asked her to do, that is, see what she could find out about Bessie Bond's connection with the Deserter Captain.

Bessie greeted her pleasantly, and then told Lieutenant Otey Onderdonk just what she had done.

"Colonel Loyal sent me here, Miss Bond, to pick up the trail, and to send you and your cowboys back to your home, *via* the fort, as you could not reach there to-night, though one of your men had better return to acquaint your mother with the cause of your delay."

"Are these orders imperative, Lieutenant Onderdonk?"

"They are, Miss Bond, as are also my instructions to send Miss Madge back with you."

"And you will remain to search for the lost trail, sir?"

"Yes, camping here all night."

"You have good scouts with you?"

"Oh, yes; Texas Jack is along, and if he cannot find the trail no one else need try."

"But you have just two hours to night-fall, and a three hours' brisk ride to the fort."

"That means that we must start?"

"Yes, though I lose good company, so am the sufferer."

So the two girls mounted their horses and accompanied by Bessie's cowboy escort and two soldiers started upon their return.

The two soldiers had accompanied her as Bessie Bond had said that she must return to Ranch Isle, but would go with Madge within sight of the lights of the fort, as it would be but little out of her way, and the couple of cavalymen could escort the Daughter of the Regiment on from there to the fort.

Night overtook them when they were yet some eight miles from the fort.

But within the next hour the distant lights of the fort came into view and Madge said she would branch off then and continue on with the two soldiers.

So she said farewell to Bessie who offered to go on with her if she felt any fear, which thought she laughed at, and then rode rapidly on her way.

Bessie Bond watched her for a minute and then turned off on the trail leading to Ranch Isle, while she muttered:

"A foreboding of evil oppresses me."

"I wish I could shake it off, but I cannot."

CHAPTER LIV.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

BESSIE BOND reached home late to find her mother most anxious about her.

She had not expected to be gone all day when she left the ranch, so when night came on and she did not appear, Mrs. Bond began to dread evil had befallen her.

Half-Breed Harry was strangely uneasy, and had urged Mrs. Bond to let him start out in search of her when Bessie Bond and her accompanying cowboys rode up to the stockade.

Tired out, as soon as she had her supper Bessie was glad to go to bed and it was late when she arose the next morning.

She had just finished breakfast, when a courier arrived from the fort.

He brought a letter from Chaplain Ben Burton to Bessie.

It was as follows:

"MY DEAR MISS BOND:—

"I wish to ask if Madge is with you

"Yesterday morning she started off with Lieutenant Onderdonk, expecting to find you, and this morning two of that officer's soldiers have been found slain near the fort, and three horses dead by their side.

"The men were killed with Indian arrows, as were the horses.

"The men were also scalped and robbed of their weapons, which would indicate that it was the work of Indians.

"A trail leading from theirs toward Ranch Isle would indicate that you had gone on home, so I write you in the hope that Madge is with you.

"With remembrance to your mother,

"Very sincerely yours,

"BENJ. BURTON."

"Mother, read that," and Bessie handed the letter to her mother, while she turned deathly pale.

"Poor girl!

"She has evidently fallen into the hands of the Indians," said Mrs. Bond, while tears filled her eyes.

"She has fallen into the hands of that arch fiend, Edward Vincent, mother."

"I will go at once to the fort and learn all about this affair, but I will return to-night, so do not feel anxious."

"I will return with the courier, so as not to leave the ranch without all of its defenders."

"Oh, Bessie! when will all this end?" cried Mrs. Bond.

"At the gallows, when Edward Vincent stands under its shadow," was the almost savage rejoinder of Bessie Bond.

Fifteen minutes after, she was dashing away toward the fort, the courier following, and finding it hard to keep up with her.

She did not spare her horse, and before Chaplain Burton was anticipating the return of his courier, Bessie Bond dismounted at his door.

"Oh, Mr. Burton, what does this mean?" she asked.

He led her into the room where his wife was, and said:

"You saw how excited all in the fort are, for we fear that Madge is surely a captive to the Indians, as a courier came from Onderdonk's command an hour ago, and stated that she had left with you and your cowboys and two soldiers."

"The two dead men are the ones who were to be her escort, and we saw that only three trails diverged from yours."

"There was one ray of hope, as it was not the horse Madge rode away, but the saddles and bridles of all were gone."

"I can explain about the horse, for it was mine, which went slightly lame, and Madge said she would exchange with me, as she only had a couple of miles to ride to the fort from where I left her."

"Was your horse a claybank, Miss Bond?" eagerly asked the chaplain.

"Yes, sir."

"Then there is no doubt, and Madge is a captive to the Indians."

"But will you come with me to the colonel, and tell him what you know about the affair?"

"Certainly, sir."

Both Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder, pale-faced and anxious, were with the colonel when the chaplain and Bessie entered headquarters.

They greeted her eagerly, and she told how she had met the Deserter Captain in the canyon two nights before, had sent word to the colonel, the next morning had taken the trail of the outlaw chief and followed it until it was lost.

The arrival of Lieutenant Onderdonk was told, and how he had sent her back with Madge, and where they had parted, she exchanging saddles with the lost girl.

All this was carried out by facts, as the scouts had found the two dead soldiers and three horses not half a mile from where they had branched off from Bessie Bond and her cowboys, and in full view of the lights of the fort.

The soldiers and the three horses had been killed with Indian arrows and the men scalped, yet there were no hoof-tracks leading away from the fatal spot, no trail of a horse, none of a red-skin that could be followed.

But that Madge had been captured by Indians seemed an assured fact to all, yet Bessie Bond startled all by saying:

"I do not believe, Colonel Loyal, that it was the work of red-skins."

"Then what is your theory, Miss Bond?"

"It is the act of the Deserter Captain."

"Ah! you believe that he made the capture?"

"I do, and I warned you that he would strike and quickly."

"He has done so even quicker than I believed possible."

"Night before last, but that I deceived him, I would now be at his mercy."

"To-day it is poor Madge, and may Heaven have mercy upon her if she cannot be speedily rescued from the power of that man."

CHAPTER LV.

BUFFALO BILL HAS AN OPINION.

LIEUTENANT ONDERDONK had sent back a courier to say that the trail was irrevocably lost in the mountains, and to know what he should do.

Up to the return of the courier he would still keep his whole force upon the ranch for the lost trail.

Colonel Loyal had sent back word for him to return to the fort, if he had met with no further success, leaving a couple of his scouts on the watch behind him, in case those they sought should be in hiding and reveal themselves, believing all of the party gone.

Texas Jack and one other were accordingly left behind, and the lieutenant hastened back to the fort, his heart aching at the news brought by the courier of the loss of Madge.

But the young officer, as he neared the spot where Madge and the two soldiers had parted with Bessie Bond and the cowboys, saw a horseman approaching whose presence he greeted with a shout.

"Ho, Buffalo Bill, of all men the man I wish to find," and he grasped the hand of the scout who asked in his quiet way:

"What's up, lieutenant?"

"I'll quickly tell you.

"The Daughter of the Fifth is in the hands of the red-skins."

"My God!

"When did this happen?"

The young officer told the whole story and then the scout said thoughtfully:

"I came across this very trail, and knowing that it meant mischief I followed it, without taking time to notify the captain.

"I followed it to within a few miles of Skeleton Gap, where it put about, and I stuck to it, for only one horse-track went on to the canyon, and it came back.

"Then I saw another trail, a smaller one, leading into it, and next this trail was crossed returning.

"I took the latter for a scouting-party from the fort."

"It was Miss Bond and five cowboys."

"Yes, there were six tracks."

"And you were following the Indian trail just now when we saw you?"

"Yes, sir, but you say you have lost it."

"Could not the scouts pick it up, sir?"

"Not one, and Texas Jack was along."

"Then you could have had no better man."

"I left him and one of his men back in the mountains to watch."

"That may develop something, sir.

"But where was Miss Madge captured?"

"We are going to the spot now."

"I will join you, sir, for I wish to start upon this trail from the beginning, and we will."

They soon arrived at the spot where the three dead horses lay.

Buffalo Bill checked the men before they got near them, dismounted, handed his bridle-rein to a soldier and said:

"Who has passed since, sir?"

"My courier, going to the fort and returning."

"May I ask all to keep back now, sir, except yourself?"

"Certainly, Cody," and the order was given.

Buffalo Bill then followed in the trail of the three horses, taking in carefully just how they had been going, and all that he saw in the situation.

"They were riding single file, sir, one soldier twenty feet in front of Miss Madge, the other soldier following half that distance behind.

"They were fired upon, sir, just as they entered this clump of trees, and the three horses were brought down about the same time.

"There is no other track here, sir, except that of your courier passing and repassing, and the party who came from the fort and carried the two bodies in.

"Lieutenant Onderdonk?"

"Yes, Cody."

"These three horses were shot from this side, and see here, sir:

"You note that a lariat was tied across the trail, between these two trees, for here are the marks, and that horse in the lead dashed against it with great force and was hurled back, but the rope cut into the trees."

"That is so, Cody."

"That horse was the last one shot, the center one dropping with the first shot, the one in the rear half turned and fell, and the third had turned when he was shot, for the wound is upon the other side of his head, as you see."

"So it is."

"All three shots were in the head, as you notice, sir, and an Indian arrow sticks in each wound."

"Yes."

"Now no arrow made these wounds, sir."

"What?"

"They are bullet wounds with arrows shot in."

"Why, Cody?"

"See here, sir," and the arrow was pulled out from the wound in the head of one of the horses.

"This skull is fractured, and no arrow could do it, sir."

"It was done with a forty-four caliber revolver, and it is not the work of Indians."

"How do you know?"

"Well, sir, red-skins would never have left the clothing on those soldiers, which your courier says they did, or if so, every button would have been cut off."

"Your courier says that one of the soldiers was shot in the center of the forehead, the other in the side of the head, and the arrows were in the wounds."

"Now that was dead-shot shooting extraordinary, and I'll guarantee it was all done with bullets and the arrows were put into the wounds afterward."

"Now see here, lieutenant, the man who did this work stood right there by that tree."

"He had stretched his lariat in the shape of a V and into it rode his victims."

"Then he opened fire, killed the horses first then the soldiers, and captured Miss Madge."

"He took the weapons, saddle and bridles and his prisoner and departed, and on foot."

"Now we must find the tracks, so you can leave me here while you go on with your men to the fort, for I have an idea that I can find the other end of this mysterious trail."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE TRAIL OF MYSTERY.

LIEUTENANT ONDERDONK knew the chief of scouts so well that he at once did as he requested.

He went on with his troopers to the fort, leaving Buffalo Bill alone.

The fort was some three miles distant, the settlement being nearer, and the lights, had it been night, the scout knew could plainly have been visible.

Buffalo Bill closely examined the nature of the locality.

The trail just there ran along a ridge, with steep banks on either side, some ten feet in height.

The ridge ended in a clump of perhaps a dozen scattering trees, and just here those in ambush had led the victims into a trap.

The very nature of the ground was in favor of a trap, for the lariats stretched in V shape from a tree ahead, back to one on each side fifty feet from it, would not be seen in the shadows of the moonlight, and yet, breast-high to a horse, would corral him firmly if he did not break the lines by a dash against it.

"They knew of their coming and knowing this spot selected it," mused the scout.

"Indians would never have done this."

"Had there been several of them there would have been no need for such a trap to catch them."

"I do not believe there were more than two at most."

"Whoever they were came here on foot."

"If I cannot find out where they left their horses then they came from the fort."

"That looks likely, though it was from the settlement, not the fort, as not a soul in Fort Beauvoir would harm that beautiful girl and shoot down two soldiers."

"No, they were from the settlement who did this, and I know there are some hard characters there, as well as some good men."

"It looks to me as though they knew she was coming back and so laid in ambush for her."

"Now where did they come from, where did they go?"

"And who were they?"

"These three questions I have got to answer to my entire satisfaction before I let go this trail."

"I only wish Frank Powell, was here, for he's got a great head on those broad shoulders of his, and sees things no one else can except with a microscope."

"But this looks like a lone hand for me to play, for I do not wish other help, if I cannot have his."

So saying Buffalo Bill sat down, lighted his pipe, a gift from Lord Lonsfield, a buffalo-head with diamond eyes and gold horns.

He smoked for a while, looking for ideas in the smoke as it curled upward, and trying to follow the trail in the clouds.

After the last cloud of smoke had circled away he sprung to his feet and said impatiently:

"This trail is a terror!"

He paced up and down for some minutes and muttered again:

"This trail is a terror, a mystery I cannot see a solution to to save my scalp."

"I wish Frank Powell was here."

But Surgeon Powell was away with Captain Taylor's command, and just then very anxious with others at the mysterious disappearance of Buffalo Bill, for he had left the camp for a short scout and had not put in an appearance the next morning, for it will be remembered that he took the trail of the Deserter Captain's band on their way to Skeleton Gap, and was following it when he came upon Lieutenant Onderdonk and his party returning from their unsuccessful search.

At last the scout began to make circles around the spot where the tragedy had occurred.

He made each round larger than the preceding one until he at length found himself circling over half a mile from the spot where the dead horses lay.

But this did not check his purpose, and as the circles grew still larger he walked back to where he had staked his horse out, and mounting kept up the same tactics.

He had at last made his circle extend fully a mile from the starting point, but with the patience of a red-skin was still widening it, when suddenly at the point further from the fort he drew rein.

Quickly he sprung from his saddle, and stood gazing attentively at the ground.

There, in a thicket, he saw tracks.

There were the tracks of three horses, and they had been hitched there in the thicket.

"The tracks indicate that they were here about an hour or two."

"Yes, all of the horses are shod."

"And they came from up in the mountains."

"Let me see, here is a man's track with a small heel, and here one with a heavier, rougher shoe on."

"The horses left here by the same trail they came on."

"I will follow that trail."

He turned off on the trail of the three horses, and after a short distance found where it turned into a mountain stream.

Here he paused a moment.

"If they came down the mountain, they went back that way, so they came down the stream and went up it."

"I shall go up-stream, too."

He rode his horse into the creek, and began to stem the current.

In places the traveling was rough, and the scout said:

"This ride these men made by daylight, I feel certain."

After following the stream for several miles, he came to where the trail left it.

"Three horses still," he muttered as he eyed it closely.

Then for several miles he followed the trail, and, night coming on, he halted.

He staked his horse out, spread his blankets, and not daring to light a fire, ate his cold supper and lay down to sleep.

But when daylight broke, he was up and once more on the trail.

CHAPTER LVII.

SILENT WEAPONS

THE scout started again upon the trail, and his experience showed him that, when those who left it had not expected to be fol-

lowed, they yet had taken certain precautions against pursuers.

The trail was hidden when it could be, and now and then the chief of scouts was put to his wits' end to discover it.

But this was more owing to the nature of the ground in places than the ability of those he followed to hide it.

At last the scout halted for breakfast.

He would not again light a fire, for he did not wish the smoke to be seen.

He was going toward a country he had never liked.

It was a country which was almost barren, and where even game could not be found.

The grass was poor and nothing inviting was there in the scenery about him.

No Indians went there for there was nothing to call them into a land so barren, and as a hiding-place it was not good on account of the scarcity of grass and game.

"Yonder are the Eagle Cliffs, and from their summit a splendid view can be had, so those fellows must be able to keep an eye upon any one approaching.

"If they have taken Miss Madge there it is to keep her in hiding until they can reach the Indian country in safety, for they must know that the scouts and cowboys are moving now.

"Well, I am out for game and must not let two or three men keep me back.

"I'll skirt along the timber where I can and see what I can find upon Eagle Cliffs, for I am sure this trail goes right there and nowhere else."

So the scout resumed his way once more and toward noon had almost reached the summit of the Eagle Cliffs.

He was still following the trail, which wound here and there, showing that the one who had led that way knew just what he was doing.

One thing that cheered the scout was the fact that the three horses which he was following up the mountain were the same that had gone down to the scene near the tragic death of the two soldiers.

The two trails were there, the one going the other returning.

Taking his glass and examining the cliffs the scout saw no signs of life there, no indication that any one was on the watch.

He knew that the ridge ran back and downward in one mass of rocks, and if any one had sought shelter there they had doubtless gone to a spot where there was a mountain stream, a wooded glen and grass in plenty, the only nook on the cliffs where such was the case.

He had been but once before upon the ridge, but he recalled having camped in this place, and that it was capable of supporting half a dozen horses for a few days at least.

Without discovering any trace of life on the ridge, the scout was yet too wary to be caught in an ambush. He could again find the trail he was following, upon the ridge, but he would not pursue it up there for fear some one might be upon the watch, and pick him out of his saddle with a bullet before he sighted his foe.

So, he made a flank movement of half a mile, and ascended to the cliff from another point.

Glancing back, he beheld a grand view behind him, and his glance showed him, miles and miles away, Fort Beauvoir looking like a miniature.

As he looked he saw a dark object crawling along, miles away, in a valley. This form looked like a huge black serpent; but the practiced eye of Buffalo Bill told him that it was a troop of cavalry on the march.

"It is Captain Taylor's command going to the fort. They have been sent for, evidently. I guess they wonder what has become of me.

"Well, if they don't find out soon, Frank Powell will be upon my trail, that is certain. I hope he will, for this is about the most lonesome trail I ever followed, and the worst.

"But if I can rescue poor Miss Madge what do I care?

"Poor child, she must be suffering greatly to feel that she is in the hands of those cruel red-skins, if red-skins are her captors, which I doubt.

"Yes, it looks like pale-face work to come here to Eagle Cliffs, only to hide; for what would bring any one here, unless he came on the errand I am on?

"Well, I will now know how much further this trail leads."

He mounted his horse now and rode on, his way leading amid a mass of piled-up rocks, rising about him in fantastic shapes.

On he went until he was in the midst of these rocks, and another fifty yards would bring him to the summit of Eagle Cliffs, when suddenly, like flying serpents, a score of silent weapons were launched upon him, and Buffalo Bill found himself and his horse securely lassoed by unseen foes, who, though dressed in uniform, wore masks—foes who were none other than the Deserter Captain's outlaw band!

Buffalo Bill at last was in the toils of his worst foe!

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE DESERTERS ON THE WAR-PATH.

THERE was not the shadow of a doubt but the Deserter Captain had been most cleverly deceived by Bessie Bond, when he met her in the Skeleton Gap.

He had not the slightest doubt but that she did have friends there, and within call, and hence she escaped him, for otherwise he would have made her his captive, unless she was able to kill him or escape, which was doubtful.

It will be remembered that having gained the good will of the Sioux, by the giving away of the booty he had *cached* in his retreat, and which had not been found, he had gotten his three white companions in crime together and then organized a band of red-skins, who were to go in uniform and wear masks.

They were also to be armed with rifles, revolvers and lassoes, as well as bows and arrows, while they were to ride the American horses in the village, which were larger and fleetier than the Indian ponies.

There were to be twenty-four Indian braves, the three white men who had been made officers, and half a dozen pack-horses, the latter being Indian ponies, to be on hand should they be needed.

Thus equipped the Deserter Captain started upon his first raid with his new command, promising to bring back plenty of scalps and booty to his red-skin friends.

He had lost no time in getting ready and he had intended making the false canyon in Skeleton Gap his retreat, feeling assured of its safety for him and also that it was the best place to lie in wait and capture Madge, Bessie Bond, or either one or both of the English officers.

He had ridden on ahead leaving his command to follow, and came suddenly upon Bessie Bond.

The result is known to the reader.

But he was beaten at his own game of "bluff," and was only too glad to get away from a vicinity he deemed so dangerous.

He felt his helplessness if Buffalo Bill and others made a dash upon him, and was anxious to get back to the companionship of his band.

He heard the voices of new cowboys on their way to the ranch, and he supposed they were scouts, as Bessie Bond had hinted.

When he rode out of the canyon, he went back on the trail he had come, to meet his men.

He did this, as has been seen by the trails which Bessie and her cowboys followed.

But the lost trail must now be explained.

The Deserter Captain was sly as a fox and as cunning as a coyote.

He had selected well in going to the Eagle Cliffs, for he felt that no one would suspect his presence there, and he feared his trail might be followed.

Having reached the stream into which he turned, when leaving it he did so by tearing double blankets in two long strips and fastening the ends together.

Along this, made some hundred feet in length, the horses were led so as not a track was made upon the soil where, without it, a trail could hardly be found.

It was slow and tedious work, but the Indian members of the band were patient and painstaking, and the white men were naturally so, understanding all that depended upon a complete hiding of their trail, should they be followed.

And thus the ridge was reached, and the little glen with its stream was selected as the

camping-place, for it was larger than Buffalo Bill had imagined it was.

Having placed his band in a safe retreat, the Deserter Captain determined to carry out alone a bold plan he had in view.

He therefore took with him Sergeant Dickson and one of the Indians, leaving the band under command of the man Kirby, whom he had made his lieutenant.

They left the ridge by the other slope, made a flank movement, and covering up their trail as well as they could, were nearing the plains when the keen eyes of the Deserter Captain saw forms moving along the valley.

He turned his field-glass upon them and saw that they were a mounted party of nine.

Two of these were horsewomen, two in soldiers' uniform, and five looked like scouts.

They were going slowly along, and the Deserter Captain recognized them.

"Yes, it is Bessie Bond and Madge Burton, with two soldiers and a party of scouts.

"They have been following my trail I verily believe, and are now returning.

"Bessie Bond will go to her ranch with the scouts, doubtless, and the fair Madge will branch off to the fort.

"At least that is my idea, and I will act upon it.

"How strange it will be if she falls right into my hands.

"What a streak of luck.

"If I had all my band here I could capture that entire outfit.

"But as it is I must have that girl Madge.

"Yes, I will cut down the Grand Canyon, leave our horses in hiding, and lie in ambush on the trail they must take to go to the fort.

"Come!"

With this he set off down the mountain-side at a more rapid pace.

He branched off to the left, saving several miles here and there by short cuts which he understood well.

At length, just at dark he left the horses in hiding, and telling the white man and the Indian to bring their lariats with them, he hastened on along the trail leading to the fort.

They came in sight of the distant lights of the fort, and then reached a clump of timber on the edge of a ridge.

Here the Deserter Captain halted with the remark:

"This is the spot I seek."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE CAPTIVE.

"Now, sergeant, my plan is just this:

"We can stretch our lariats among these trees so as to have those who come this way ride into the trap.

"If all whom we saw come this way we can, from our hiding-place in the shadows, cut the lariats when they come near enough for us to see just who is coming.

"If only one girl and the two soldiers come along then they are our game.

"I wish you, Dickson, and the Indian to shoot the horses of the soldiers, and aim at their heads.

"I will shoot the two soldiers and the horse ridden by the girl, and I will look to her capture too."

"Will they not hear the shots from the fort, sir?" asked Dickson.

"No, the wind is from that quarter, and even if it was not they would not be heard.

"If they were I will risk it.

"Now take position, and remember, if I give a low order to cut, then sever the lariats."

"Yes, sir."

"If I do not, then you take the horse of the soldier in the lead, and you, Fox, the horse of the other soldier.

"Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes," said the Indian.

And so the three waited patiently for the coming of their victims.

The moon would reveal them quite distinctly, and soon they heard the fall of hoofs."

"They are coming."

The Indian uttered a sound of satisfaction, and the sergeant said:

"I am ready, sir."

Then there came into view three horses and riders.

There was a soldier in the lead, next Madge Burton then another soldier.

Into the lariat trap they rode, and suddenly there rung out five shots in quick succession.

The Indian had fired one and the sergeant another, each bringing down a soldier's horse.

The Deserter Captain had fired the other three shots and his aim had been deadly, for the two soldiers had gone down with their horses while the animal ridden by Madge Burton dropped dead in his tracks.

Madge had managed to alight upon her feet, but in an instant she felt herself in the powerful grasp of the Deserter chief while the revolver which she had drawn was struck from her hand.

In vain she struggled, for she was in a grasp of iron, and the Indian springing to the aid of the chief, she was quickly bound beyond resistance, her hands being secured behind her back.

"She must be gagged, too, for I want no tuneless note of hers to give warning of what is going on.

"Make me a gag, Dickson."

"Who are you, sir?" and Madge now spoke for the first time.

"The Deserter Captain, if you wish to know, Miss Madge."

"And why am I selected for the honor of being your captive?" was the cool query of the brave girl.

"I need only tell you that I am well aware of your value as Lady Madge Vancourt, to show how high I regard you from a financial standpoint."

"Then I am to be held for ransom, it seems?"

"Well, I have not decided whether I shall get a large sum in ransom, or all of your fortune by marrying you."

"You are the basest of the base, for now I know you as you are, the pretended Don Eduardo Vincente."

"Have you that gag ready, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir, it is here."

"Do not gag me, and I'll promise not to speak a word."

"I will not trust you, sweet Madge," and with this the gag was forced into the mouth of the young girl and made fast behind her head.

"Now, Dickson, you get some arrows from Fox and put them in the wounds of those horses, while he scalps the two soldiers, whose arms take with you.

"Then you and Fox take your lariats, return to your horses, and go back to the Eagle Cliffs."

"You will not go back, then, sir?"

"No, I shall go to the fort."

"That will be very dangerous work, captain?"

"No, I think it the safest plan."

"And I am to take the captive back with me, sir?"

"Oh, no, she goes with me."

"To the fort!"

"Oh, captain, do not risk it, I beg you."

"Sergeant, the way I shall go, is the safest thing that I can do.

"I will go to the settlement, not to the fort, and this girl will be just as safe there, yes, more so, than she would be in the glen on Eagle Cliffs."

"You know best, sir."

"Then the Indian is to go back with me?"

"Yes, and take the saddles and bridles from their horses with you, and my helmet, for I have an officer's bat with me in my saddle there."

The hat was secured, then the saddles and bridles taken off the dead horses, and the Indian did not fail to get the scalps from the heads of the soldiers.

"I do not know just when I will come, sergeant, but within a week.

"Keep a guard on the watch day and night, and if you find you are to be attacked by a force larger than your own, retreat to the Sioux village.

"I will come when I can, and will have good news for you, I think.

"Now go."

The sergeant saluted, as also did the Indian, and the two, loaded with the saddles, bridles and weapons they had secured, set off on their way back to their horses.

"Now, Miss Madge, will you walk with me, or shall I carry you?"

She nodded, as she could not speak, and

taking her arm he led her on along the trail they had been ambushed in.

The Deserter Captain knew the way well, and often came to a halt to allow the young girl to rest.

At last they ascended a hill, and the lights of the fort were not far away.

There, too, were the lights of Emerald Ed's saloon, going in full blast, for it was only an hour after midnight.

Flanking the Devil's Acre, and without seeing a soul, the Deserter Captain led the way around the gambling saloon to the cabin in the rear, situated close under the steep bank of a hill.

"Now, Miss Madge, you will be safe," he said as he led her through the stockade wall about the cabin.

CHAPTER LX.

IN SUSPENSE.

THE situation at the fort was one of suspense.

Bessie Bond had seemed deeply pained at the mysterious disappearance of Madge, and all in fact, at the fort were.

That she had fallen into the hands of the Indians all believed, with few exceptions.

But the one who was sure that the Deserter Captain was at the head of it all, was Bessie Bond.

She had ridden over to the fort with the chaplain's courier, and had sent word back by messenger to her mother that she would not return until nightfall, and to have Mayhew and four of the cowboys come after her.

She had also sent a note by the messenger to Mayhew, saying:

"Be sure that your disguise is perfect, for I have something for you to do.

"Come prepared for a journey.

"You will find me at the quarters of Chaplain Burton."

This was sent by special messenger, and soon after Lieutenant Onderdonk and his men returned, excepting Texas Jack, and one other scout left in the mountains on watch.

The lieutenant reported the meeting with Buffalo Bill, who had remained behind to study the situation, and that the scout had said that he was sure that white men, not redskins, had planned the capture of Madge.

After a talk with the lieutenant the colonel decided to dispatch a courier ordering Captain Taylor and his command back to the fort, or its vicinity at least, leaving only several scouts back in the mountains to watch and report any move in force the Sioux might make toward the fort.

A well mounted courier was at once dispatched to find Captain Taylor's command, and to report that Buffalo Bill was scouting in the vicinity of the fort, where some band of the Indians seemed to be hidden.

Soon after the departure of the courier, Colonel Loyal received a visitor.

It was Bessie Bond.

"Colonel Loyal, I have come to see you upon an important matter," she said.

"I am always glad to see you, Miss Bond."

"There need be no witnesses, if you please," and she glanced at the adjutant who arose and retired.

"Colonel Loyal, I believe it is in my power to find this kidnapper of Madge Burton."

"Indeed, Miss Bond?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have always felt that you possessed wonderful powers, Miss Bond."

"Do not sneer, please."

"It is not meant as such, I assure you, for I have a high appreciation of your abilities, Miss Bond, the only thing to your detriment being that you were a mystery."

"All women are."

"I believe you are right there," was the hearty reply.

"Now, Colonel Loyal, I have no explanation or apology to make for myself or my mother.

"If understood aright it would be admitted that we had a right to be mysterious, for we have had bitter foes.

"But I come to speak for another, and one who I believe can find Madge Burton.

"The truth is, Colonel Loyal, I plead for one whom the hand of outlawry is against."

"Indeed, Miss Bond?"

"Yes, sir, one who was a member of the band of Deserters."

"Ah, I see how he can, by betraying his captain, gain a pardon."

"Let me tell you, sir, that he knows nothing of this.

"But let me suppose a case."

"Certainly."

"A cadet at West Point who stood at the head of his class, was popular with officers and cadets alike, was accused of theft.

"He was dismissed in disgrace upon seeming proof of guilt.

"Innocent, he determined to yet work his way up in the army, and under an assumed name enlisted.

"He rose rapidly to the highest rank under that of a commissioned officer, when, recognized by a lieutenant who was a cadet with him, he was called a thief.

"Maddened by the charge, and embittered from the past, believing that ruin and disgrace still followed him, he struck the officer a blow which felled and stunned him.

"Realizing what he had done, he fled and became a deserter.

"He was met by red-skins pursuing an officer and he beat them off.

"The officer escaped, bearing important dispatches, the rescuer telling him to go though he was severely wounded, and he gave the lieutenant his horse to escape on.

"The deserter was taken prisoner, badly wounded, and his life was saved by a white renegade who nursed him back to life.

"When the deserter got well he was sent, for by his rescuer and made one of his Deserter band.

"He was known as the sergeant in the band, was detailed by the Deserter Captain to escort my mother and myself to New Mexico, where we went to visit my brother's grave.

"We were to be taken across the line as conspirators against Mexico, along with Captain Luiz and Noel Norcross whom you met, and about whom I need say no more.

"This Deserter sergeant saved us, though his men were against him, and alone brought us back to Ranch Isle.

"He was met by the Deserter chief, who accused him of being a traitor to him, and was shot and left for dead.

"I found him unconscious, for the ball had glanced on his skull, and the Deserter Captain believes him to be dead.

"Now it is this man, this Deserter sergeant, for whom I plead, and who I believe can find the Deserter Captain and his captive, for he knows all of the outlaws' retreats, and, as I said, is supposed by his chief to be dead."

CHAPTER LXI.

THE FAIR PLEADER.

THE colonel had listened most attentively to all that Bessie Bond had said.

He saw that she had some deep motive in what she was telling him, and he wished to get at the bottom facts.

The young girl at last waited in silence for the colonel to speak, and seeing this he said:

"Miss Bond, do you know you make a very good pleader?"

"I am glad to hear that, sir."

"I happen to know of a young cadet who was dismissed under the circumstances you refer to."

"Yes, sir, and was he guilty?"

"He was proven innocent by the confession of the thief, a servant, and it was thought at the time that one of the cadets had instigated the theft and to ruin the one who was dismissed.

"Every effort was made to find the poor boy, but in vain."

"And was it known, sir, that this cadet was also guilty, as far as to plot against his comrade with the servant?"

"It was known only by his confession, when dying, that he had placed temptation in the way of the servant, and in such a manner that it would be, if he did steal, considered a cadet who took the money.

"He was wounded two years ago in a fight with Indians, and made this confession to the chaplain when he was dying, asking him to look up the man whose life he had wrecked.

"He said furthermore that he had seen and recognized him, and in bitterness had called him a thief, but before he could say more he died."

"May I ask if the officer you refer to, sir, was one of the —th infantry, B company?"

"He was."

"A first lieutenant, commanding his company at the time?"

"Yes."

"Then you know his name, sir, without my referring to it, and as he is dead let his sin against his brother cadet die in the grave with him."

"So say I, Miss Bond."

"And now, sir, to this unfortunate cadet?"

"Yes."

"His name is Manning Mayhew?"

"That is the man, Miss Bond."

"And he is the deserter, Colonel Loyal."

"Poor fellow."

"Can you blame him, after all his struggle for honor to twice be made to fail, and an outcast from those who condemned him, if he went wrong when tempted by the Deserter Captain who saved his life?"

"Miss Bond, it is under just such circumstances that I think I would go to the bad, if they fell to my lot."

"You are a noble man to say that, Colonel Loyal, and I feel that I can trust you."

"Some day you may know all that I have to bear, but I wish you now to know that I desire, above all things in this world, to see the Deserter Captain brought to the gallows."

"I hope for the same end for him, Miss Bond."

"I know that he has Madge in his power, and that he intends to force from her English kinsmen a large sum in ransom."

"Ah! this is his motive then?"

"It is, sir."

"I feel that, in the absence of Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, the man to track down the Deserter Captain is the one who was a member of his band, and I plead with you, knowing his life as you do, that you will give him the chance to take the trail, and to win a pardon."

"I will gladly do so, Miss Bond."

"Now I sent him to you the other night as a courier."

"Ah! that is the man then?"

"Yes, but he was in disguise, and is now on his way to the fort, disguised as he then was."

"I have sent for him, and he will be here, and all I ask of you is to keep his secret, and to pledge him a pardon."

"Miss Bond, you forget I know nothing in the matter."

"Ah! but you are aware that he struck his superior officer, and deserted."

"That is another man on the army rolls, Miss Bond, for his name was Felix Nixon," said the colonel, significantly.

"Ah! I see now the drift of your meaning, I believe."

"It is in effect, that if my cowboy, Mayhew, aids in the capture of the Deserter Captain, he has to report to you that he was the cadet who was dismissed from West Point, and for a crime he was afterward proven guiltless of, in consideration for which he would be appointed to the army by the President, provided he pledged himself, under the circumstances, having led a temporary cowboy's life, to resign his commission the day after he had received it."

"I think you would make a very remarkable lawyer, Miss Bond, both as a pleader and a reasoner, for you have put the case in a way which I had not considered, yet will, under all circumstances, provided the secret of Felix Nixon, Deserter, and the Deserter sergeant are not taken into consideration, but is kept between the unfortunate man Mayhew, and yourself."

"Colonel Loyal, you are a jewel, and I could almost—but I won't."

"No, just tell this man Mayhew when he comes to report to you, for I shall send him, as soon as he arrives, what you know of him, what your decision is and you wish him to do."

"And I'll tell him that he owes it all to you, Miss Bond."

"But he does not, as he would find out if I had other officers to deal with than yourself," was the answer as Bessie arose to take her leave.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE COLONEL AND THE COWBOY.

MANNING MAYHEW the cowboy promptly obeyed the call of the fair lady rancher, to

go to the fort, and called to four of the new men to accompany him.

He was anxious to push on as rapidly as possible, and reaching the fort at once went to Chaplain Burton's with his men.

Bessie Bond came out to meet them and said:

"Jerry, I wish you to be ready with your men to return with me after nightfall, for I shall remain as late as I can to get news."

"You, Mayhew, remain here, for I have work for you to do now."

The cowboys saluted and rode away, excepting Mayhew, who had dismounted and was standing by his horse.

"Mayhew, I sent for you for a special service, and without consulting you have relied upon you to do it."

"In your disguise no one excepting the colonel need know you."

"The colonel?" cried the man in some alarm.

"Yes, for he knows your whole story and is your friend."

"But go now and see him and talk matters over, and do as he asks, for I wish you to go and find the Deserter Captain."

"I believe I can do it, Miss Bessie."

"I am sure of it, for you know his haunts, and he is in the nearest and safest one to the fort, that is certain."

"That is my idea."

"Now go and have a talk with the colonel."

"I will do so, and Heaven bless you, Miss Bessie, for my guardian angel you certainly are," and the cowboy spoke with considerable feeling.

Then he went over to headquarters, and sent in word to the colonel that the cowboy from Ranch Isle asked to see him.

The orderly promptly admitted him, and rising, the colonel said:

"Mr. Mayhew, permit me to offer you my hand, first in sympathy at all you have suffered, and then in congratulation at the career you are to lead in the future."

"I have seen Miss Bond, and she is a warm friend of yours."

"She has told me all that you became, and the palliating circumstances under which you turned your back upon a life of honor."

"Ah, sir, but the provocation was strong."

"I can well understand that."

"But do you know, sir, that I was falsely accused at West Point?"

"I do, for that all came out in your favor."

"And I could have blasted the man who ruined me, sir, yet was silent."

"When again I sought to live another life, by a fatal accident I was sent to his company, and he gave me a provocation I could not resist, and—"

"That was as Felix Nixon, and he is marked upon the army list as a deserter, who struck his superior officer."

"With that I have nothing to do, and I trust, and believe, that Deserter Felix Nixon will never be found."

"Then there was a Deserter sergeant of an outlaw band, who was shot by his chief, so that ends his career of evil."

"Now I have only to deal with one, Manning Mayhew, who turned cowboy, and made an exile of himself because he was falsely accused."

"This cowboy, Manning Mayhew, at the risk of his own life, saved an officer from death at the hands of the Indians, and sent him on his way upon his horse, while he, wounded, and upon the lieutenant's tired-out horse, tried to escape, in fact we will say did escape."

"Now, for all that he had suffered as a cadet, for his bravery in saving that lieutenant, and for his services rendered in hunting down this Deserter Captain, I can promise this cowboy, Manning Mayhew, a commission in the army, appointed by the President, if he will pledge himself to resign the day after said commission reaches him, for then his honor will have been vindicated, and there will not be an officer in the service who was under the ban of outlawry."

"Do you comprehend the situation, Cowboy Mayhew?"

"I do, sir," and the voice of the strong man quivered, while he dashed a tear from his eye.

"Now, Mr. Mayhew, sit there and let us see what we can do to catch this Deserter

Captain, for as you are in disguise it will not be suspected by him who you are, especially as you are supposed by him to be dead."

Mayhew took the seat and it was full a minute before he could speak.

But he held out his hand to the colonel in silence, and the act was more suggestive of his feelings of gratitude than words would have been.

"I happen to know, Colonel Loyal, every retreat of this man."

"He has captured Miss Burton within a short distance of the fort, and he has taken her to some place near, that is certain."

"I will therefore, sir, guide any force you wish to send me with, to the various retreats, and I can approach them by night just as well as by day."

"You think that he has some Indians with him?"

"He would not take many, sir, and you may be sure that he has them dressed in uniform as soldiers, for several times he has told me that he would some day have red soldiers instead of white, and by masking them no one whom he robbed would know the difference."

"That is a point to remember, and the trail discovered carries out your idea, as there were about thirty horses that made it."

"Then a troop of cavalry, sir, would be all I need, though I would like Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell along also."

"Powell is away with Captain Taylor, and Buffalo Bill is off now on the trail left by the captors of Miss Burton."

"Then, sir, please permit me to take Buffalo Bill's trail alone, and we will see what we can do, before we call upon the troops."

"Just as you please, Mayhew," was the colonel's reply, and the cowboy left the fort half an hour after to pick up Buffalo Bill's trail.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE COWBOY TRAILER.

It was not very long after the departure of Cowboy Mayhew before the command of Captain Taylor came into the fort.

The captain reported to the colonel that he felt certain that there was no intention of the Indians to make a raid in force from the mountains, but that he believed several small bands of them were on the war-path.

One of these bands Buffalo Bill had followed, and failing to return the next day, Surgeon Powell had gone off upon his trail, while he decided to bring his command back to the fort, and was glad to meet the courier, telling him to do that very thing.

The courier had also reported the capture of Madge Burton, the presence of a small band of soldiers in the neighborhood of the fort, and that Buffalo Bill had followed their trail down from the mountains and around to the spot where the two soldiers had been slain, and the Daughter of the Fifth captured.

"Surgeon Powell will follow Cody's trail around and keep upon it, sir, and I can only say that it will be best for me to camp in the fort, as it were, to be ready to go at an instant's notice if needed."

"The very thing, Captain Taylor."

"But let me tell you that Onderdonk left Texas Jack and another scout up in the Eagle Cliffs country, Buffalo Bill has already gone off in that direction, Powell will still follow him, and I have just sent a man on the trail, a cowboy from the Ranch Isle, in whom I have every confidence."

"Some of them will bring us news, I am sure, and if they all meet they will make a very strong force, even against thirty or forty Indians."

"They will indeed, sir; but may I suggest that a scout be put on each of the trails leading out from the fort at a distance where a signal can be seen, so that if needed he can signal us, and I can be that much sooner on the go."

"A good idea indeed."

"There is hardly a position, sir, on any of the trails, where a man could not be stationed three miles, at least, from the fort, and a signal from him would get my force there by the time he could ride here."

"Arrange it to suit yourself, Captain Taylor, and at once, with lanterns for use at

night, and put double sentinels here on the watch for those signals," said the colonel.

Thus advised, Captain Taylor led his troop to camp in a valley near the fort, where they would be hidden, but could mount and away in an instant.

Twelve scouts were sent out to signal night or day, two men for each trail, and to take position where they could be readily seen.

A courier was sent at full speed to overhaul cowboy Mayhew, and report to him how the cavalry was under arms, and that scouts were at different points about the fort to signal if there was anything to communicate.

The courier overtook the cowboy right at the scene of the capture of Madge, and the death of the soldiers.

He was dismounted, and studying the situation.

He thanked the courier for the information, and went on with his work of studying the scene most thoroughly.

He soon found Buffalo Bill's trail, followed it out to where it began to go in a circle, and to save time at once cut off in a straight line to find the last circle.

He was fortunate in hitting just where the outlaws had left their horses in the thicket, while they went into ambush.

So on he went from there on the trail of Buffalo Bill.

He had not followed it very far before night came on, and he could no longer see the trail.

But, unlike the scout, he did not have to camp for the night, for he said:

"Yes, I have seen enough to know that this trail leads to the north, way up to Eagle Cliffs.

"Whether it is the trail of the kidnappers of Miss Burton I do not know, but it is the one that Buffalo Bill is following, for he has started on it from the scene of the capture, and the killing of the soldiers.

"I very much fear that if Buffalo Bill approaches Eagle Cliffs by day he will walk into a trap, for he does not know the situation there as I do, nor that the Deserter Captain always keeps sentinels out.

"It looks to me very much as though the Deserter Captain had taken the band to the Eagle Cliffs by the trackless way, and returned with a couple of men by the north way and made his capture.

"Lieutenant Onderdonk was unable to find the trail, he said, beyond a certain point, and left Texas Jack and one other to watch.

"Well, I'll push on up to the summit tonight by the north way, see what I can discover, and if I can, find Buffalo Bill, and return by the trackless way and try and run across Texas Jack and his pard."

Having had his supper and given his horse a rest, Mayhew again moved on.

The moon was shining brightly, but he did not need its light, for he was going to a retreat he knew well.

Up the steep path he went and at last left his horse where he could get some grass and at the same time rest while awaiting his return.

He reached the summit, and instead of approaching the glen from the front, went to the overhanging cliffs, where he knew he could look down upon it.

He reached a point where he could gaze over into the glen, or canyon, and he knew that the camp was there, for he had already caught the glimmer of the camp-fires.

There he saw the horses of the men, the red-skins in uniform, Kirby and two other white men, and lying near a tree, bound hands and feet, was Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LXIV.

WELL MET.

COWBOY MAYHEW took matters very coolly.

He did not run away when he had made his discovery.

He simply took in the situation as it was.

There is Kirby and the other two of the old band, all who escaped.

"Then there are twenty two Indians in the camp here, and that means two more on sentinel duty.

"The band numbers, therefore, the Deserter Captain, three white officers and twenty-four red-skins, twenty-eight in all.

"There are just thirty-one horses there,

which means two for pack-animals, and one is Buffalo Bill's.

"But I see the Deserter's black horse Satan there also, but where is the chief?"

"That is the question.

"He is not there, for I know him too well, and Kirby would not be so boisterous if he was.

"He was not alone in kidnapping Miss Burton, but here are all the band I am sure.

"Miss Burton is not there and the chief is not there.

"No other place in these cliffs could they be, so where are they?"

The man seemed puzzled, and remained gazing upon the scene.

"This is no temporary camp, so here I can find them when I come for them.

"Now, to find the captain and his fair captive.

"What retreat can they be in, and has he another band there?"

"I must find out, but Buffalo Bill must be rescued, for his life is not worth anything should the Deserter Captain return."

With this the cowboy trailer left his place of observation and went back the way he had come.

Down the steep mountain-side he went until he came to his horse.

"Ah, Mister Sentinel, had I gone on horseback you would have seen me from your perch up there; but I knew you were there so did not give you the chance," he muttered as he looked up to the cliff far off to the right and up which the trail led by which way alone he could have taken his horse.

He mounted, and keeping in the timber, as he had come, rode on down toward the valleys where it was more fertile.

As he reached a point where he could have turned around the loftiest cliff, he halted.

"Now, I could go around to the trackless trail side, and find Texas Jack; but I had best not delay, for I must go back to the fort and have a command of troopers up here early to-morrow night."

The cowboy again went on his way and it was only toward dawn that he halted for rest, for his horse needed it as well as himself.

He threw himself upon his blankets until the dawn came and then resumed his way.

He had not gone very far before he saw three horsemen approaching him.

They saw him at the same instant that he did them and drew rein.

But though he had at first glance hesitated, he now rode on, while he said:

"I have seen the time when the sight of those three men would have sent me away in rapid flight, or caused me to open fire upon them.

"Now, thank Heaven, it is different.

"I am glad now that I did not go around the cliff to search for Texas Jack and his pard, for then they would have gone into a trap as Buffalo Bill did."

The three men whom he referred to were Surgeon Frank Powell, Texas Jack and his scout comrade who answered to the name of Wild Charlie, a dashing young scout, who was always ready for any sport or fight that might come his way.

They did not advance as they saw the cowboy coming, but sat upon their horses awaiting him.

"Is that your man, doctor?" asked Texas Jack.

"Yes, that is the man, according to the colonel's description of him."

"He is a stranger to me."

"And to me; but the colonel told me he would answer for him under any and all circumstances, Jack."

"That is recommendation few men can get, sir."

"Very true; but he is on the back trail."

"That means that he could not have found the outlaws, or met Buffalo Bill."

"So it would seem."

"Well, we'll soon know it all," said Wild Charlie.

A moment after the cowboy rode up and gave Surgeon Powell a military salute, while he bowed to Texas Jack and Wild Charlie.

To him the three were known by sight, but his disguise hid him, and even if it had not, he would not have been recognized.

"Surgeon Powell, I presume?" said the cowboy.

"Yes, sir, and you are doubtless Cowboy Mayhew?"

"I am, sir."

"I have seen Colonel Loyal, and he told me you had taken the trail of Buffalo Bill, hoping to find him, and together discover Miss Burton?"

"Yes, sir, and I have found Buffalo Bill."

"You have?"

"Yes, sir; he is in the outlaw stronghold, up on Eagle Cliffs, and a prisoner."

The faces of the three men showed with what regret this news was received, while Surgeon Powell said:

"This is terrible news, for that means death to him."

"In the end, yes, sir; but let me explain the situation, first saying how glad I am to meet you all, as I was on my way back to the fort, to report to Colonel Loyal my discovery.

"Some distance back, knowing that Texas Jack and a comrade were in the mountains, I thought of turning around the cliffs and going to what is known as the trackless side of them.

"Fortunately I did not carry out my intention, as you would have gone on up the cliffs and fallen into an ambush as Buffalo Bill did."

"Do you know Texas Jack, sir?"

"We are not acquainted, sir."

"This is Texas Jack with me, and this gentleman is Wild Charlie, Mr. Mayhew."

The two scouts offered their hands, while the doctor said:

"So we would have ridden into an ambush?"

"Yes, sir, and one from which there was no escape, for they are just twenty-seven of those fellows up in the cliffs."

"Ah! and Cody was ambushed?"

"Beyond all doubt, sir, as he is a prisoner."

"Wounded?"

"I do not think so, sir, for he looked all right, though bound hands and feet."

"You have seen him then?"

"Yes, sir, last night, and was within a hundred feet of him."

"But how did you escape the ambush?"

"Because I knew how to avoid them by a trail I had been on before," was the frank reply.

"You think they will not harm Cody before we can rescue him?"

"The Deserter Captain, is not there, sir, nor is the young lady he captured."

"Hah! you are sure of this?"

"Perfectly, sir, for I saw every one in the camp."

"Might he not have been near?"

"No, sir, he is not there, and there is no place near for him to be."

"He did not bring the captive to the Cliffs camp, sir."

"Where did he take her?"

"That we must find out, sir, as soon as we have rescued Buffalo Bill, which must be to-night," was the firm response of the Cowboy Trailer.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE MIDNIGHT MARCH.

"WELL, Mr. Mayhew, it is for you to say what is to be done, for I was told by Colonel Loyal that you knew just what you were about."

"Thank you, Surgeon Powell, for your kind trust in me, a stranger."

"When did you leave the fort, may I ask, sir?"

"I was on Buffalo Bill's trail, and came upon Colonel Loyal and his escort at the scene of Miss Burton's capture and the death of the two soldiers.

"He had ridden out to the spot, and I met him, so we had a talk together, and I decided to follow upon the trail of Cody and yourself."

"I am glad that you did so, sir."

"I held on until night, and met Texas Jack and Wild Charlie, and we camped together, for of course we could not follow the trail by night, though you appear to have done so."

"I did not have to keep to the trail, sir, to go where I wished."

"Had I done so, then I, like Cody, would now be a prisoner to the Deserter Captain and his red skins."

"Indians, eh?"

"Well, sir, three white men of his band escaped from his retreat near the Sioux camp, and these are with him."

"The others, twenty-four in number, are Indians."

"I see; but now to Cody."

"My plan, sir, is to send word to the scout sentinel nearest this trail, and have him signal for Captain Taylor's command, for it has been so arranged, as perhaps Colonel Loyal made known to you."

"Yes, he told me about his circle of scout sentinels, and it is a good idea."

"It saves an hour of time, sir, and may even do more good."

"But we will go into camp below here on the stream, and if you would send one of your scouts with the message, I would esteem it a favor."

"You can go, Wild Charlie, for you were complaining of being ill, and can go into the fort and lay up."

"Thank you, sir, for I am under the weather, and that is why Jack came with me to the trail to start me to the fort."

"I'll push on rapidly, though, sir, for my horse is fresh."

"Do so, Charlie, and see the colonel personally, telling him the exact situation, but do not speak to any one else about Cody's capture, and that Miss Burton is not here."

"No, sir, I will not."

"But you will meet Captain Taylor and his men, so tell him that he will find me here, with Scout Mayhew and Texas Jack."

"There must be a clean sweep, sir, this time, so ask Captain Taylor to bring all of fifty men, and men who can walk as well as ride, for it will be a two-mile tramp on foot from where we leave our horses," said Mayhew.

After a few words more from Surgeon Powell, Wild Charlie started upon his ride to the fort, while the three others sought a camping-place, and got breakfast, going off the trail, but in sight of it, to do so.

Wild Charlie's not feeling well himself, and in fact he was really ill, did not, however, affect his horse, and he sent the animal along at a rapid pace.

He was always a hard rider, and his horse knew it, yet was a little surprised at the gait he was kept at on that day's ride.

In just an hour and a half Wild Charlie reached the first scout sentinel, and shouted out:

"Set 'em a-flying Jim, for Captain Taylor and a half a hundred Boys in Blue, for they is wanted up yonder in the highlands."

"All right, Wild Charlie," and the scout seized his flags and began to wave them.

Almost instantly they were answered from the fort, showing that the sentinel there was upon the alert, and in less than ten minutes after Wild Charlie cried:

"That beats all, for there comes the blue-coats on the jump."

Then the scout started on his ride to the fort, and not long after met Captain Taylor.

The troop was at a gallop, their gallant captain at their head, and with him was Lord Lonsfield and Sir John Reeder, in fighting trim.

Holding up his hand, as a token that he wished to speak to him, Wild Charlie said, as the captain drew rein by his side:

"Surgeon Powell's in camp, sir, on the mountain trail, along with Texas Jack, and that strange scout, who has found out that Buffalo Bill is a prisoner, and you and your troop are needed for night-work up in the mountains."

"Good! then Powell is waiting for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right; report to the colonel when you get in," and Captain Taylor was off to overtake his men like a flash.

He explained to Lord Lonsfield and Sir John what he had heard, and all were disappointed that nothing had been said of the other captive, Madge, though delighted at the prospect of rescuing Buffalo Bill, whose capture they could not understand.

Finding that there was no need of pushing his horses too hard, Captain Taylor slackened down to a walk, and at noon came in sight of Surgeon Powell's camp.

The captain and the two English officers were welcomed warmly by the Surgeon Scout, who presented Mayhew to them.

All eyes were turned upon the heavily

bearded, long-haired stranger, whom no one seemed to know, but whom the colonel had so warmly recommended.

Mayhew had little to say, and seemed to wish to shun company, for he kept to himself as much as possible.

After a two hours' rest and dinner, however, he came up to Captain Taylor and said:

"It is time to move, sir, if you please."

The order was given and with Mayhew and Surgeon Powell riding side by side in the lead, the command moved on up the mountain to the rescue of Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE SURPRISE.

THE strange guide ahead of the command would certainly have been distrusted, had it not been for the praise the colonel had bestowed upon him.

To all he was a stranger, and there were several who felt that perhaps after all the colonel was wrong in his opinion of him and the man might be leading them into a trap.

But he went on his way unknowing comment, and certainly showed that he knew what he was about.

At a certain point where the trail went on up the mountain, he kept on in a straight direction, merely remarking:

"That is the trail that Buffalo Bill followed, and which we must avoid."

Night came on to find the command in heavy pine timber land, but barren as the rocks about it, otherwise.

A halt was made for the men to eat a cold supper and to water the horses, which had to go supperless on their way.

Then came an hour's ride and another halt, when the guide said:

"Leave your horses here, sir, please, and a guard of several men, for I believe you have all you will need."

"I have forty-eight, all told," answered Captain Taylor.

Eight men were left with the horses, and then the command, divesting themselves of spurs and swords, started on the march.

The cowboy guide went to the front with the Surgeon Scout, then came Captain Taylor, and by his side walked Lord Lonsfield and Sir John.

Behind them came Lieutenant Onderdonk and the men, with Texas Jack bringing up the rear.

The march was all of two miles, and a rough one, for it was a climb over rugged rocks.

The moon lighted their way in a cloudless sky, and had there been any one on the watch within a quarter of a mile they could have been seen.

This Captain Taylor suggested, but Mayhew replied:

"No one sees us, sir."

"That is why we are going this way on foot."

The ridge was soon reached, and the guide led them skirting through the rocks toward the edge of a cliff.

It was this cliff, or wall of rock, which was penetrated by a canyon, or glen, and here was the camp.

"Come with me, sir, please, and leave your men here."

Captain Taylor obeyed, and with the Surgeon Scout followed Mayhew to the edge of the cliff.

"There is the camp, sir, so have your men remove their boots and get into position here, all except a few, who, under Surgeon Powell, I will guide around to the entrance of the glen."

"When we are in position the Surgeon will give his war-cry, and you open fire upon those in the canyon, but be sure and see where Buffalo Bill is, for he must not be shot by accident."

"By Jove, but there is Cody playing cards with three white men," whispered Captain Taylor.

"Yes, but you see that his hands are not wholly untied, and his feet are bound."

"I guess Bill is playing another game than the one with cards," said the Surgeon Scout.

The light of half a dozen camp-fires made the canyon as bright as day.

The Indians sat about in groups, and the horses were on the edge of the canyon cropping grass, which was getting scarce.

"There are two more Indians, one not far off on the west cliff, acting as sentinel, and the other at the south cliff."

"I will guide Surgeon Powell to position and then go after them."

"If he gives me ten minutes before he utters his war-cry it will be enough."

"Do you wish some one with you, guide?"

"No, sir, thank you," and the cowboy set off followed by Surgeon Powell, the two Englishmen and a dozen cavalymen, the others, under captain Taylor and Lieutenant Onderdonk guarding the head of the canyon to prevent escape in that direction.

Thus half an hour passed and then wild, terrible and weird was heard the well-known war-cry of Frank Powell.

It fairly froze the blood of those in the canyon with horror.

But following it came the rattle of carbines as the soldiers on the cliff opened fire, while with yells the party under the Surgeon Scout rushed into the canyon.

"Frank Powell to the rescue!" came in the well-known voice of Buffalo Bill, and the soldiers gave a cheer.

Shots were fired by Kirby and his men, and by the red-skins, and it was not wholly a bloodless battle on the part of the Boys in Blue, for one soldier went down never to rise, and a dozen received wounds more or less severe.

But the band in the canyon was wiped out, for those not at once killed were dying, and Buffalo Bill was rescued.

Kirby had received a fatal wound, but when approached by Captain Taylor and others he would not utter a word, and Buffalo Bill could tell nothing about the Deserter Captain and Madge.

Threats were useless, bribes likewise, for the man said stubbornly:

"I will tell nothing."

"Let me speak to him alone," said Mayhew advancing.

All fell back, and the cowboy knelt by the side of the dying outlaw.

"Kirby, do you know me?"

"No."

"You are going to die."

"I know it."

"You have been a very wicked man."

"I know that too."

"Do you not wish to make your peace with Heaven by one good act?"

"How?"

"Where is your captain and that poor girl he kidnapped?"

"Who are you?"

"One whom you once told that you would die to serve, for I have saved your life a dozen times."

"I do not know you."

"I am the sergeant."

"Good God!"

"You a traitor?"

"He said you were dead."

"He gave me this wound, shot me in cold blood, when I was not a traitor."

"He herded with Indians and I came here for revenge, to do good, and he, not I, am responsible for your death."

"Sergeant, you are right."

"You supposed I was killed up at the retreat."

"I will tell you where he is, and thus get my revenge."

"And your last act shall be a good one."

"Yes, a good—one—he—is in the—"

"Great God! he died with the confession unmade."

"But he said enough to give me hope that what I half believed is right," cried the cowboy, as Captain Taylor and the others came running forward as they heard the words excitedly spoken by Mayhew.

"He is dead," and Surgeon Powell dropped the pulseless hand of the dead outlaw.

CHAPTER LXVII.

A SUSPICION.

THE outlaws and their Indian allies were hastily buried in the glen, and their horses were taken for the use of the wounded soldiers on the way back.

As the party filed out of the canyon up to the ridge they came upon the body of an Indian.

"One of the red-skin sentinels, sir," laconically said Mayhew, and an order was given to bury him.

Reaching the other side of the ridge another Indian was seen prone upon the ground.

"The other Indian sentinel, sir."

"All present or accounted for," was Mayhew's suggestive remark, and in spite of discipline the soldiers laughed.

"You have a very apt way of putting it, Mayhew," said the Surgeon Scout.

The guide led the way straight down the trail; told the Surgeon Scout where to halt, and then he hastened on to bring up the men and horses left in the timber a mile away.

This was done, and when the command reached a spot where there was grass and water they went into camp, the cowboy remarking:

"There is no need of an early start, sir, unless you wish."

"But how do you account for the saddle and horse ridden by Miss Madge, and the horse and traps of the Deserter Captain being found in the canyon, and they not be there, Mayhew?"

"I knew they were not there, sir, and to-morrow night we will look for them."

"You, Mr. Cody, followed the trail of those who were with the Deserter Captain when he captured the young lady, did you not?"

"Yes, and I supposed the Deserter Captain and Miss Madge were along."

"But, I was seen on my approach by the Indian sentinel, and they arranged a picnic for me."

"I tell you I thought I had the snakes, for the air was full of whirling lariats, and I was yanked off my horse and tied up in an instant."

"Those white devils, begging their pardon, as they are dead, would tell me nothing, and the Indians only looked at me, and fondled my scalp, so I could tell nothing about the chief."

"To-night they asked me to take a hand at cards, and thinking I might get a chance to give them the slip, I did so."

"But you should have seen those Indians sit around in a circle like a pack of coyotes and watch me."

"I tell you, gentlemen, when that chief came to camp, I was to be killed and scalped, that much I know, and you have my lasting gratitude."

"It was Mayhew the cowboy who did it, Bill," Frank Powell said.

"Well, I haven't had an introduction to Mr. Mayhew the cowboy, and I don't need one now, for he knows what I think of him, for we are pardons for life."

As the party rode on the next morning, Mayhew called Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell to the front with him, for instinctively he had held his position as guide.

"I wish to ask you, gentlemen, if you have any idea about where the Deserter Captain and his captive are?"

"Somewhere much nearer the fort than this, I am sure," Buffalo Bill remarked.

"I agree with you, Bill," said Surgeon Powell.

"Well, just see what you think of my idea."

"Yes."

"Fire away, pard."

"Now, the Deserter Captain you know as Don Eduardo Vincente?"

"Yes."

"He lived at the fort?"

"He did."

"Where?"

"He had his own quarters."

"Who occupies them now?"

"His former pard and servant combined, a man known as Dandy Dan."

"He is at the fort now?"

"He is."

"Well, Miss Madge was taken near the fort, and her horse, saddle and bridle were taken back to the Cliffs, as were also the captain's?"

"That is so."

"There are no trails leading away from the spot except those we followed."

"Now, the only way he could leave with his captive was on foot."

"Ha! Mayhew, that's the right note," cried Surgeon Powell.

"Now you have the tune," Buffalo Bill added.

"Well, when Kirby was dying he slipped off with the words—at the—"

"Now, that could only mean at the fort, and as the Deserter Captain was there, had a friend there, why he went directly there with his captive, which he could do late at night, or rather to the settlement, and not be seen."

"Mayhew, you have hit the nail squarely on the head this time," said the Surgeon Scout.

"You have, indeed, pard," Buffalo Bill rejoined.

"Well, he is there, with his friend Dandy Dan, and waiting a chance some night to get away with his captive, go to the Eagle Cliffs, get his band and make for the Sioux villages."

"You are surely on the right trail."

"I think so, doctor, and to-morrow night we will know."

"What is your plan?"

"We will return in sight of the fort to-day, but leave the captured horses and the wounded until night, and the captain to go on with his men, as though he had found no one."

"We will follow after dark, and we can surround the house of this Dandy Dan, and then some one can call upon him."

"When he comes to the door, why, then it will be a case of hands up or die, with him, and if you do not find Miss Dodge hidden in that cabin, then I am very much mistaken."

"I am sure that we will, and your plan shall be carried out."

"Cody, call Captain Taylor and the English officers to the front, and we will talk it over," Surgeon Powell said, and as they rode along the idea and plan of the cowboy was made known and fully agreed upon to be carried into effect that night.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE RESCUE.

THE plan of the cowboy, Mayhew, was to have Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell, Captain Taylor, the two English officers, Lieutenant Onderdonk and himself go to the cabin of Dandy Dan.

They were to surround it, and Buffalo Bill was to ride up upon horseback and call the man out, telling him he had orders from Colonel Loyal to tell him to report at headquarters.

When near him the chief of scouts was suddenly to draw his revolver and order him to throw his hands above his head.

With Dandy Dan caught, then the Surgeon Scout and Mayhew were to rush into the house and the others were to guard all escapes without.

Then the place was to be most thoroughly searched for the Deserter Captain and his captive.

This plan was carried out perfectly.

Buffalo Bill galloped up to the cabin door, called Dandy Dan, and as he came out upon the little piazza said:

"I say, Dan, the colonel wants you."

Advancing upon him he suddenly covered him with his revolver and the stern order followed:

"Hands up, quick!"

Dandy Dan obeyed but with a gasp, an oath and a face that was white with fear.

Then the scout gave a signal and the man saw Surgeon Powell and Mayhew advance and the latter slipped irons upon his wrists, while he said:

"Now, sir, where is your captain?"

"Inside."

"And the lady?"

"She's in her jail room."

The prisoner was given over then to Lieutenant Onderdonk and the three captors stepped into the inner room of the cabin.

There sat the Deserter Captain reading, and ere he was aware of it he was in iron hands.

A moment after and in an inner room of the cabin, one built back into a cavern in the cliff, and which was not known, was found Madge Burton.

She was chained with a manacle about one wrist, and yet otherwise was not rendered uncomfortable, though her face was pale and haggard.

From that jail room her loudest cry could not have been heard, and she felt that she

was wholly at the mercy of the man whose captive she was.

Now, when rescued, she broke down completely, and was taken at once to the fort and her old home at the chaplain's, where Colonel Loyal, apprised of all that was going on, had gone to welcome her.

When at last the prisoners had been placed in the guard-house, and the rescuers assembled in the home of the chaplain to hear the story told by Madge, it was found that Cowboy Mayhew was not of the party.

He had quietly and most mysteriously disappeared, and whither he had gone no one knew.

Inquiry showed that he had been seen to ride away from the settlement out upon the plains, but whither he had gone no one appeared to know.

CHAPTER LXIX.

CONCLUSION.

THE mysterious disappearance of Mayhew, the cowboy, was accounted for to Colonel Loyal by Bessie Bond, when she came over to the fort to congratulate Madge upon her escape.

She told Colonel Loyal that the cowboy had appeared at the ranch without his disguise, and as an old friend of hers, and so had been welcomed by herself and mother.

This had been also believed by the cowboys there, excepting by Half-Breed Harry, who had pretended that he knew Mayhew as an outlaw and had attacked him in the presence of her mother and herself.

To defend his life Mayhew had killed the man.

Bessie knew that Half-Breed Harry's action had been caused by jealousy, and a desire to get rid of the one who he believed would win the heart of the Maid of Ranch Isle.

The colonel was as good as his word; Manning Mayhew in time received his commission, which he at once resigned, and returned to Ranch Isle to take charge of the place for Bessie Bond, who returned with her mother to Texas, where she learned that Captain Alvarez and his cousin had both been captured and put to death as conspirators.

"This ends my dream of love, mother, and I retire forever from the world," she said sadly when the news was told to her, and afterward she became known as the Hermitess of the Ranch.

Madge Burton returned with her kinsmen to England, accompanied by Chaplain and Mrs. Burton.

But though she was honored and courted there as a heroine and beauty, she returned to the United States and became the wife of Lieutenant Otey Onderdonk, of the army.

As for Colonel Loyal, Surgeon Powell, and Buffalo Bill, they still live, and are too well known to my readers by name and fame as heroes of to-day, for me to say more than to wish for them the success in the future they have known in the past.

The Deserter Captain, Edward Vincent, was shot to death at Fort Beauvoir in trying to make his escape, and thus after all cheated the gallows of its prey; but Dandy Dan, his secret pard, is still serving his time in State's Prison.

With the wiping out of the Deserters, the trails about Fort Beauvoir were not longer infested with outlaws; but it will be many a long day before the stories told of the Deserter Captain and his men will cease to be told by bordermen around the camp-fires in the land of strange romance and stranger reality.

THE END.

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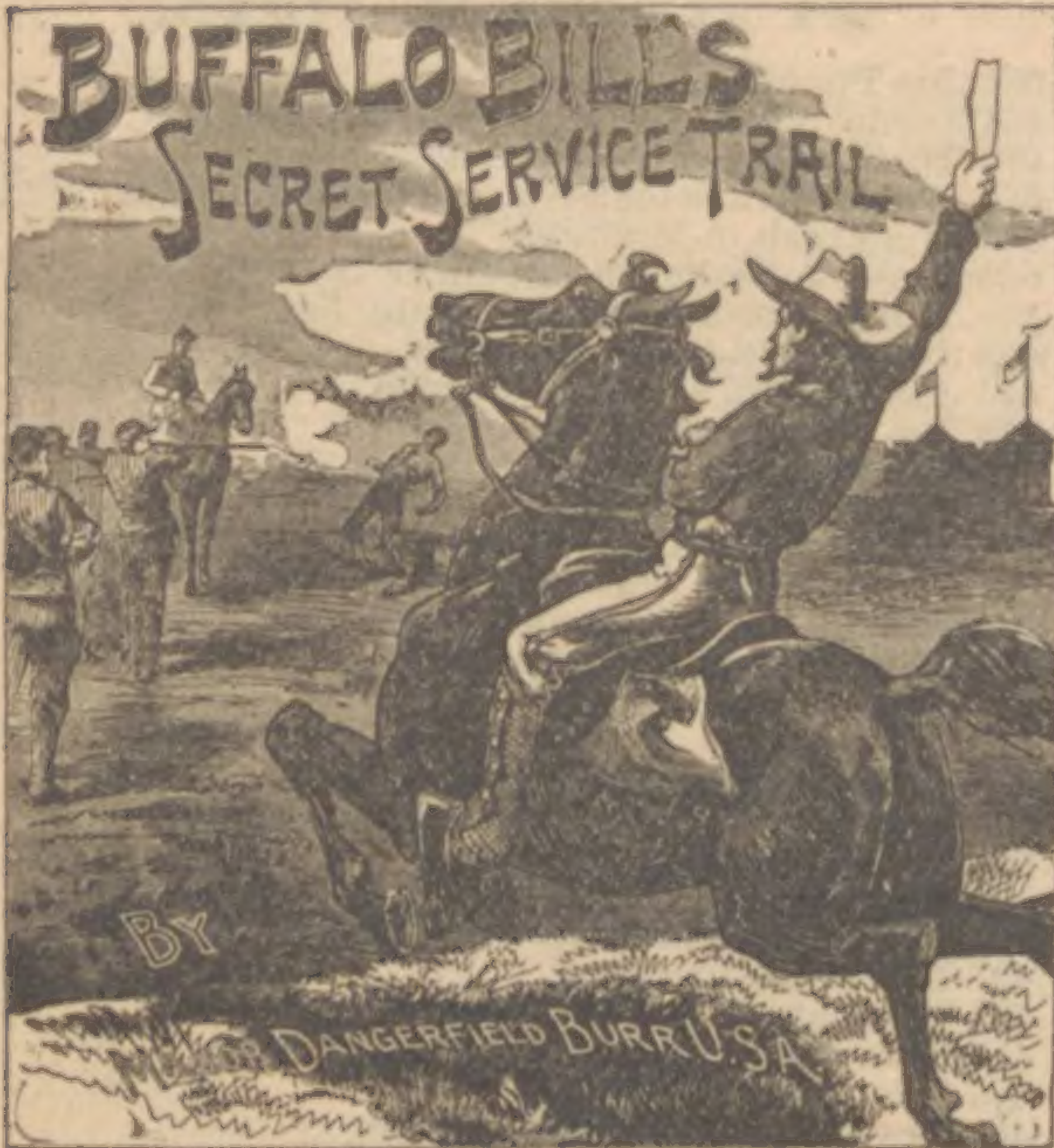
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